# QUESTIONING GENDER

## A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION • FIFTH EDITION

ROBYN RYLE

# Questioning Gender

Fifth Edition

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## A Sociological Exploration

Fifth Edition

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# BRIEF CONTENTS


**Specific Areas of Interest** xv

**Preface** xxi

**About Questioning Gender** xxiii

**PART I WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT GENDER? 1**

Chapter 1 What Is Gender and Why Should We Care About It?: Introducing Gender 3

Chapter 2 What's the "Sociology" in the Sociology of Gender?: Understanding Sociology and Gender 15

Chapter 3 How Do Disciplines Outside Sociology Study Gender?: Some Additional Theoretical Approaches 47

**PART II HOW ARE OUR LIVES FILLED WITH GENDER? 75**

Chapter 4 How Do We Learn Gender?: Gender and Socialization 77

Chapter 5 How Does Gender Matter for Whom We Want and Desire?: The Gender of Sexuality 121

Chapter 6 How Does Gender Impact the People You Spend Your Time With?: The Gender of Friendship and Dating 161

Chapter 7 How Does Gender Matter for How We Think About Our Bodies?: The Gender of Bodies and Health 203

**PART III HOW IS GENDER AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE WAY OUR SOCIETY WORKS? 247**

Chapter 8 How Does Gender Impact the People We Live Our Lives With?: The Gender of Marriage and Families 249

Chapter 9 How Does Gender Affect the Type of Work We Do and the Rewards We Receive for Our Work?: The Gender of Work 293

Chapter 10 How Does Gender Affect What You Watch, What You Read, and What You Play?: The Gender of Media and Popular Culture 341

Chapter 11 How Does Gender Help Determine Who Has Power and Who Doesn't?: The Gender of Politics and Power 383

**Glossary** **431**

**References** **441**

**Index** **473**

**About the Author** **485**

# DETAILED CONTENTS


**Specific Areas of Interest** xv

**Preface** xxi

**About Questioning Gender** xxiii

**PART I WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT GENDER?** 1

**Chapter 1 What Is Gender and Why Should We Care About It?: Introducing Gender** 3

Swimming With the Fishes: Learning to See Gender 3
Gender, the Binary, and the Social Construction of Reality 4
Gender and Intersectionality 5
Sex or Gender: What's the Difference? 6
A Biosocial Approach 6
A Strong Social Constructionist Approach 7
Gender and Bodies 7
Intersex and the Social Construction of Sex 9
Transgender People and the Social Construction of Sex 10
Historical and Cross-Cultural Evidence 10
Sex or Gender? 11
A Word About Biology and Strong Social Constructionism 11
Why Study Gender? 12
Key Terms 13

**Chapter 2 What's the "Sociology" in the Sociology of Gender?: Understanding Sociology and Gender** 15

Why Do You Need Theory to Understand Gender? 15
Three Reasons to Learn Gender Theories 16
Gender in Sociology Before Feminism 17
Feminist Theories and Their Influence on Sociological Thinking About Gender 19
The First Wave of the Feminist Movement 20
The Second Wave of the Feminist Movement 21
The Third Wave of the Feminist Movement 21
The Fourth Wave of the Feminist Movement 22
He for She: Men and Feminism 23

Sociological Theories of Gender 24
Gender and the Sociological Imagination 24
Sex Roles 27
Interactionist Theories 28
Sex Categorization 28
Doing Gender 29
Undoing or Redoing Gender? 33
Institutional or Structural Approaches 34
Gendered Organizations 34
Integrative Approaches 36
Intersectional Theory 37
Hegemonic Masculinity 41
Conclusion 43
Big Questions 43
Gender Exercises 44
Key Terms 45
Suggested Readings 46

**Chapter 3 How Do Disciplines Outside Sociology Study Gender?: Some Additional Theoretical Approaches 47**

Psychological Approaches to Gender 48
Sex Difference Research 48
To Research or Not to Research? 49
The Bottom Line on Sex Difference Research 51
Queer Theory 54
Origins in the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement 54
Enter Postmodernism/Poststructuralism 57
Three Key Features of Queer Theory 59
Gender Theories in Global Perspective 62
The Colonial Period 62
The Development Project 63
What About Women? 64
Gender and Development 65
Decolonizing Development 66
Ecofeminism and the Environment 66
How Do We Use Theory? 68
Big Questions 70
Gender Exercises 71
Key Terms 72
Suggested Readings, Podcasts, Websites, and Videos 72

**PART II HOW ARE OUR LIVES FILLED WITH GENDER? 75**

**Chapter 4 How Do We Learn Gender?: Gender and Socialization 77**

Sorting It All Out: Gender Socialization and Intersex Children 78
Genital Tubercles and Ambiguous Genitalia 79
What Can We Learn From the Stories of Intersex People? 83
"Normal" Gender Socialization 85

Some Theories of Gender Socialization 86
Social Learning Theory 86
Sex-Typed Behaviors 87
Cognitive-Development Theory 87
Stages of Gender Socialization 88
Gender Schema Theory 90
What Is a Schema? 90
Characteristics of Gender Schemas 91
Psychoanalytic Theory 92
The Gender of Ego Boundaries 93

The Early Years: Primary Socialization Into Gender 95
Primary Socialization 96
Gender-Neutral Preschools in Sweden 97
Doctors Teaching Gender: Intersex Socialization 102
Doctors and Gender Socialization 103
Coming Out as Intersex 103
The Importance of Peer Groups 106
Slopes and Skirts: Socialization Into or Out of Sports 106
Varieties of Peer Culture 109

Learning Gender Never Ends: Secondary Socialization 109
Learning to Be American: Socialization Through Immigration 110
Gender and Hybrid Identities 110

What Happens to Gender as We Age? 112
The Gender of Caregiving and Alzheimer's 114

Summing Up 115

Big Questions 115

Gender Exercises 116

What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 118

Key Terms 118

Suggested Readings 119

**Chapter 5 How Does Gender Matter for Whom We Want and Desire?: The Gender of Sexuality 121**

Let's Talk About Sex 122

Does Sexuality Have a Gender? 123
Heteronormativity and Compulsive Heterosexuality 124

A Brief History of Heterosexuality 126
The Invention of Heterosexuality 127
One Sex or Two? 128
Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective 129
Mixing It Up: Sex Category, Gender, and Sexuality 132
Measuring Sexuality: What Is Sexual Identity? 132
Men as Sexual Subjects 134
Women as Sexual Objects 135
Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Feminine Sexuality 136
The Double Standard 137
Playing the Part? Sexual Scripts 138
Grinding and Sexual Scripts on the College Dance Floor 138
Sexuality in Islamic Perspectives 139
Stabane and Sexuality in South Africa 141
Violating the Scripts 142
Still Straight: Rural Men Having Sex With Men 142
Women at Female Strip Clubs 145
Bisexuality and the Bisexual Umbrella 147
Asexuality 148
Sexuality and Power: Hetero-Privilege in Schools 150
Nationalism and Heteronormativity 152
Red = Top; Black = Bottom 155
Big Questions 156
Gender Exercises 157
What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 158
Key Terms 159
Suggested Readings 159

**Chapter 6 How Does Gender Impact the People You Spend Your Time With?: The Gender of Friendship and Dating 161**

Love, Inside and Outside the Family 161
Defining Friendship 163
My Friend Jane Versus My Friend Joe: Who's Better at Being Friends? 164
Friendship in Historical Perspective 165
Gender Differences in Friendship 167
Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side 168
Friendship and Social Structure 169
Can White Women and Black Women Be Friends? Race, Gender, and Friendship 171
Gender Similarities in Friendship: But Are Women and Men Really All That Different? 172
Are Our Friendships Really All That Different? 173
The Intersectionality of Friendship and Gender 174

Friendship in Global Perspective 176
Choosing Your Friends 178
Families of Choice 180
The Rules of Attraction 181
Courtship to Dating: A Brief History 183
Hookups 187
Friends With Benefits 189
Romantic Love in Cross-Cultural Perspective 191
Love Without Gender 194
Summing Up 197
Big Questions 198
Gender Exercises 199
What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 200
Key Terms 200
Suggested Readings 200

**Chapter 7 How Does Gender Matter for How We Think About Our Bodies?: The Gender of Bodies and Health 203**

A Brief History of Bodies 204
The Beauty Myth 206
Beauty and Gender Inequality 207
Exporting the Beauty Myth 210
Eyelids and Empowerment: Race and the Beauty Myth 211
What Is Cosmetic Surgery? 214
Pretty Boys and Beauty as Power 215
Men and Body Image 217
The Importance of Being Tall 220
Masculinity, Puberty, and Embodiment 222
Transgender Bodies and Puberty 223
Is Masculinity Bad for Your Health? 225
Masculinity, Health, and Race 227
Women, Doctors, Midwives, and Hormones 230
Women's Bodies Are the Undiscovered Country 233
Menopause in Cross-Cultural Perspective 234
Eugenics, Sterilization, and Population Control 237
Throwing Like a Girl 240
Big Questions 242
Gender Exercises 242
What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 244
Key Terms 244
Suggested Readings 244

**PART III HOW IS GENDER AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE WAY OUR SOCIETY WORKS? 247**

**Chapter 8 How Does Gender Impact the People We Live Our Lives With?: The Gender of Marriage and Families 249**

Something Old, Something New 250
A Brief History of Marriage 251
Antony and Cleopatra: The Real Story 251
So What Is Marriage, Then? 252
The Demographics of Marriage 253
All the Single Ladies 254
The Marriage Squeeze 257
Globalization and the Marriage Squeeze 258
Transnational Marriage 258
Who Does What? The Gendered Division of Labor 261
Transgender Families and the Division of Labor 262
The Doctrine of Separate Spheres 264
Modern Marriage 265
Gender and the Doctrine of Separate Spheres 266
Separate Spheres in Global Perspective 269
Transnational Motherhood 271
Transnational Fatherhood 272
Disability and Risky Mothers 273
The Division of Household Labor 275
The Second Shift 277
Understanding the Household Division of Labor 279
Gay and Lesbian Households 281
Power and the Household Division of Labor 284
Families in Transition 285
Big Questions 288
Gender Exercises 289
What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 290
Key Terms 291
Suggested Readings 291

**Chapter 9 How Does Gender Affect the Type of Work We Do and the Rewards We Receive for Our Work?: The Gender of Work 293**

What Is Work? 294
Measuring the World's Work 295
A Man's Job: Masculinity and Work 299
When Men Can't Work: Masculinity and Disability 301
Men in Predominantly Female Occupations 302

The Glass Ceiling and the Glass Escalator 303
Sex Segregation in the Workplace 305
Gender and Dangerous Work: Protective Labor Laws 313
The Anatomy of Sex Segregation 314
#MeToo, Sexual Harassment, and Sex Segregation 317
The Wage Gap: Why Sex Segregation Matters 320
Making Connections: Sex Segregation and the Gender Wage Gap 320
Explaining Sex Segregation and the Gender Wage Gap 322
Socialization as an Explanation for Sex Segregation 323
Human Capital Theory 324
Gendered Organizations 328
Trans Men at Work 330
Comparable Worth and Other Solutions to the Gender Wage Gap 333
Big Questions 334
Gender Exercises 335
What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 337
Key Terms 337
Suggested Readings 338

**Chapter 10 How Does Gender Affect What You Watch, What You Read, and What You Play?: The Gender of Media and Popular Culture 341**

The Media: An Interesting Institution 342
Behind the Scenes: The Gender of Media Organizations 344
Women Making Movies 344
The Bechdel Test 346
Gender and the History of Screenwriting 347
Gender, Advertising, and the Commodification of Gender 349
The Gender of Instagram 352
Media Power Theory: We're All Sheep 354
Audience Power Theory: Power to the People 356
Transgender in the Media 357
#Disabledandcute: Body Positivity, Gender, and Disability 360
Gender, Sexuality, and Slash Fiction 362
Super Girl Fan Fiction in China 363
The Struggle Over Images 365
Harems and Terrorists: Depictions of Arab Americans in the Media 365
Beware of Black Men: Race, Gender, and the Local News 366
Homer and Ralph: White, Working-Class Men on TV 367
Disney, Cinderella, and Genderbent 369
Masculinity and Video Games: Learning the Three Rs 371
The Gender of Leisure 375

Big Questions 378
Gender Exercises 379
What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 380
Key Terms 381
Suggested Readings 381

**Chapter 11 How Does Gender Help Determine Who Has Power and Who Doesn't?: The Gender of Politics and Power 383**

Power: Good and Bad 383
Masculinity and Power 385
Who Really Has the Power? Hegemonic Masculinity 386
Coercive Power 389
The Geography of Fear 390
Sexual Assault on Campus 394
Violent Intersections: The Gender of Human Trafficking 398
Gender Rights and Human Rights? 401
Hijab and Ethnocentrism 402
Institutional Power: Defining Gender 404
Men and Women in Office 410
The Room Where It Happens: Descriptive Representation 413
Who Makes a Good Leader? Race, Gender, and Electability 415
Does Gender Equality Improve Under Democracies? 416
Strangers in the Halls of Power: Substantive Representation 419
Gendered Leadership Styles 422
Symbolic Violence 424
Big Questions 425
Gender Exercises 426
What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change 427
Key Terms 428
Suggested Readings 428

**Glossary 431**

**References 441**

**Index 473**

**About the Author 485**

# SPECIFIC AREAS OF INTEREST

## FEMINIST THEORY

### Chapter 2

Pp. 17–19: "Gender in Sociology Before Feminism"

### Chapter 3

Pp. 66–70: "Ecofeminism and the Environment" to "How Do We Use Theory?"

### Chapter 7

Pp. 206–210: "The Beauty Myth" to "Beauty and Gender Inequality"

### Chapter 8

Pp. 261–275: "Who Does What? The Gendered Division of Labor" to "The Doctrine of Separate Spheres"

### Chapter 9

Pp. 333–335: "Comparable Worth and Other Solutions to the Gender Wage Gap" to "Big Questions"

### Chapter 11

Pp. 389–394: "Coercive Power" to "The Geography of Fear"

## BEING INTERSEX

### Chapter 4

Pp. 78–95: "Sorting It All Out: Gender Socialization and Intersex Children" to "Some Theories of Gender Socialization"

Pp. 102–106: "Doctors Teaching Gender: Intersex Socialization" to "The Importance of Peer Groups"

### Chapter 11

Pp. 425–426: "Big Questions"

## BEING TRANSGENDER OR NONBINARY

### Chapter 6

Pp. 182–183: "Cultural Artifact 6.2: Swiping Right: Tinder, Online Dating, and Gender Fluidity"

### Chapter 8

Pp. 262–275: "Transgender Families and the Division of Labor" to "The Doctrine of Separate Spheres"

### Chapter 9

Pp. 330–334: "Trans Men at Work" to "Comparable Worth"

### Chapter 10

Pp. 357–365: "Transgender in the Media" to "Gender, Sexuality, and Slash Fiction"

## THE INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

### Chapter 2

Pp. 36–37: "Integrative Approaches"

### Chapter 3

Pp. 48–62: "Psychological Approaches to Gender" to "Queer Theory"

### Chapter 4

Pp. 86–96: "Social Learning Theory" to "The Early Years: Primary Socialization Into Gender"

### Chapter 9

Pp. 323–330: "Socialization as an Explanation for Sex Segregation" to "Gendered Organizations"

## THE INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

### Chapter 2

Pp. 28–35: "Interactionist Theories" to "Institutional or Structural Approaches"

### Chapter 4

Pp. 106–112: "The Importance of Peer Groups" to "Learning Gender Never Ends: Secondary Socialization"

## THE INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

### Chapter 2

Pp. 34–40: "Institutional or Structural Approaches" to "Integrative Approaches"

### Chapter 9

Pp. 328–333: "Gendered Organizations" to "Trans Men at Work"

### Chapter 10

Pp. 344–357: "Behind the Scenes: The Gender of Media Organizations" to "Media Power Theory: We're All Sheep"

### Chapter 11

Pp. 394–401: "Sexual Assault on Campus" to "Violent Intersections: The Gender of Human Trafficking"

## INTERSECTIONALITY

### Chapter 2

Pp. 37–42: "Intersectional Theory" to "Hegemonic Masculinity."

### Chapter 4

Pp. 110–115: "Learning to Be American: Socialization Through Immigration" to "What Happens to Gender as We Age?"

### Chapter 6

Pp. 174–181: "The Intersectionality of Friendship and Gender" to "Friendship in Global Perspective"

### Chapter 7

Pp. 211–217: "Eyelids and Empowerment: Race and the Beauty Myth" to "Pretty Boys and Beauty as Power"

Pp. 227–233: "Masculinity, Health, and Race" to "Women, Doctors, Midwives, and Hormones"

Pp. 237–242: "Eugenics, Sterilization, and Population Control" to "Throwing Like a Girl"

### Chapter 8

Pp. 257–261: "The Marriage Squeeze" to "Transnational Marriage"

Pp. 281–285: "Gay and Lesbian Households" to "Power and the Household Division of Labor"

### Chapter 9

Pp. 301–303: "When Men Can't Work" to "Men in Predominantly Female Occupations"

### Chapter 10

Pp. 365–375: "Harems and Terrorists: Depictions of Arab Americans in the Media" to "Masculinity and Video Games: Learning the Three Rs"

## MASCULINITY

### Chapter 5

Pp. 134–136: "Men as Sexual Subjects" to "Women as Sexual Objects"

Pp. 142–147: "Still Straight: Rural Men Having Sex with Men." to "Women at Female Strip Clubs"

### Chapter 7

Pp. 217–233: "Men and Body Image" to "Women, Doctors, Midwives, and Hormones"

### Chapter 8

Pp. 272–279: "Transnational Fatherhood" to "The Second Shift"

### Chapter 9

Pp. 299–305: "A Man's Job: Masculinity and Work" to "The Glass Ceiling and the Glass Escalator"

### Chapter 10

Pp. 366–378: "Beware of Black Men: Race, Gender, and the Local News" to "The Gender of Leisure"

Pp. 371–378: "Masculinity and Video Games: Learning the Three Rs" to "The Gender of Leisure"

### Chapter 11

Pp. 385–401: "Masculinity and Power" to "Coercive Power"

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

### Chapter 3

Pp. 62–68: "Gender Theories in Global Perspective" to "Ecofeminism and the Environment"

### Chapter 4

Pp. 97–103: "Gender-Neutral Preschools in Sweden" to "Doctors Teaching Gender: Intersex Socialization"

### Chapter 5

Pp. 129–138: "Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective" to "Measuring Sexuality: What Is Sexual Identity?"

Pp. 139–150: "Sexuality in Islamic Perspectives" to "Violating the Scripts"

Pp. 152–156: "Nationalism and Heteronormativity" to "Red = Top; Black = Bottom"

### Chapter 6

Pp. 176–181: "Friendship in Global Perspective" to "Families of Choice"

Pp. 181–187: "The Rules of Attraction" to "Courtship to Dating: A Brief History"

Pp. 191–197: "Romantic Love in Cross-Cultural Perspective" to "Love Without Gender"

## Chapter 7

Pp. 210–217: "Exporting the Beauty Myth" to "Pretty Boys and Beauty as Power"

Pp. 234–240: "Menopause in Cross-Cultural Perspective" to "Eugenics, Sterilization, and Population Control"

## Chapter 8

Pp. 258–264: "Transnational Marriage" to "Who Does What? The Gendered Division of Labor"

Pp. 269–273: "Separate Spheres in Global Perspective" to "Transnational Fatherhood"

## Chapter 9

Pp. 294–303: "What Is Work?" to "A Man's Job: Masculinity and Work"

## Chapter 11

Pp. 398–404: "Violent Intersections: The Gender of Human Trafficking" to "Gender Rights and Human Rights?"

Pp. 402–415: "Hijab and Ethnocentrism" to "Institutional Power: Nations and Gender"

# PREFACE

## NEW TO THE FIFTH EDITION

The following features are new to the fifth edition:

### Updated Consideration and Research on the Effect of COVID on Gender

In Chapter 7, information about women's and men's health is updated in the wake of the pandemic. Chapter 8 includes research on how the pandemic lockdowns affected the household division of labor.

### More Coverage of Disability and Gender

New discussion of neurodivergence, autism, and gender in Chapter 7. Disability, parenting, and "risky mothers" in Chapter 8. Inclusion of research on masculinity, disability, and employment in Chapter 9. Discussion of gender and the portrayal of disability in the media in Chapter 10.

### More Data Tables and Graphics

More tables and graphics have been included, demonstrating the latest research and statistics on gender.

### More Transgender and Nonbinary Perspective

Chapter 1 now includes an expanded discussion of thinking beyond the binary. Chapter 4 on socialization has been expanded to consider the experiences of transgender and nonbinary people. Chapter 7 includes a discussion of the intense focus on bodies experienced by transgender and nonbinary people. Chapter 8 includes a discussion of nonbinary parenting. In Chapter 10, research on representation of transgender people in the media is explored. Chapter 11 includes the latest updates at the time of publishing on antitransgender legislation.

# ABOUT *QUESTIONING GENDER*

*Questioning Gender: A Sociological Exploration* is an un-textbook. If textbooks are presumed to be the place you go to get all the answers, this book is an un-textbook in that our goal is to raise as many questions as we can about gender. We explore possible answers to those questions, but our main objective is to start a conversation that will help you to question some of the prevailing assumptions you might have about gender. This book is just the beginning of that conversation, and it is designed to serve as a resource for discussion inside and outside the classroom. *Questioning Gender* is based on the premise that a good conversation about gender will help you to connect all the complicated scholarship that has been conducted on gender to a thorough investigation of the role of gender in your own life, and for that reason, you'll find this book packed to the brim with questions. Each chapter title is a question, Think About It question boxes are inserted in each chapter, questions are included at the end of each Cultural Artifact to help you think about the prevalence of gender in our everyday lives, and Big Questions are provided at the end of each chapter to help you make connections. This un-textbook uses a wide range of theories from within and without sociology, assuming that theories are useful for the ways in which they can suggest new questions or focus the questions you already have. Then, for a wide range of topics related to gender, including socialization, sexuality, friendship and dating, bodies, marriage and families, work, and media and politics, we use a historical and cross-cultural perspective to question the things we might think we know about gender. In this book, we'll unpack many of the truths we take for granted about our social lives related to gender, turning basic concepts like sex, marriage, love, and friendship into moving targets with many potential meanings depending on who you are and when and where you happened to be born. We place the experiences of people who are usually at the margin of gender conversations (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender; women and men of color; women and men of the global South; and poor and working-class women and men) at the center of our conversations because their experiences throw open the door on a whole new set of questions that need to be asked about gender. As I tell the students in my own gender course, if you finish this book with more questions about gender than you started with, our goal will have been accomplished, and you'll be well on your way to a lifetime conversation about what gender is and what it means in your own life.

The primary course this text is aimed at is sociology of gender. It is ideal for upper-class undergraduate students (juniors and seniors), although it is cast at a level that makes it accessible to lower-class undergraduates as well. The text is firmly grounded within a sociological approach to gender, with a focus on sociological theories related to gender and research within social science disciplines. However, it is impossible to discuss gender in a contemporary context without also addressing theories from outside sociology, such as feminist theories and queer theory. Because of this interdisciplinary approach, *Questioning Gender* is appropriate for

introductory courses in women's studies and gender studies as well. This text is best suited for courses that seek to use the social construction of gender in a global and historical perspective to challenge students' preconceptions about gender and to demonstrate how gender as a system creates and reinforces inequality.

## UNIQUE APPROACHES

There are several unique approaches in *Questioning Gender* that set it apart from other gender textbooks. First, *Questioning Gender* takes a global approach to gender. In an increasingly global world, it is difficult to justify an approach to gender issues that focuses solely on the United States or the developed world. Examining gender in a global context also helps to demonstrate the social construction of gender and the persistence of gender inequality around the world. For some of the same reasons, *Questioning Gender* also uses an intersectional approach. Since women of color first brought attention to the ways in which gender intersects with race and ethnicity, those who study gender have become increasingly concerned with how to discuss gender while grounding it firmly within the complex web of identities such as race, class, sexuality, disability, religious background, and so on. Gender does not exist in a vacuum, and an intersectional approach helps to demonstrate that there is no "normal" experience of what it means to be gendered. *Questioning Gender* is also unique in incorporating the perspective of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals as well as queer theory throughout the textbook. As it is the goal of many instructors to help students understand the social construction of gender, focusing on transgender concerns helps to blur the boundaries between male and female, masculine and feminine, and homosexual and heterosexual, previously perceived as rigid. Queer theory questions all categories of difference, and the experiences and perspectives of transgender individuals provide a vantage point for students to see beyond our dimorphic gender constructions. *Questioning Gender* also assumes that questions related to gender must be answered through a consideration of both women and men and, therefore, includes the growing scholarship on the study of men and masculinity. These unique approaches to gender in *Questioning Gender* help to create a textbook that resists the tendency to normalize certain understandings of gender while marginalizing others. For example, many textbooks segregate discussions of gender in a global perspective into one chapter or certain sections of the chapter. In this book, global experiences of gender are incorporated throughout the text, decentering the idea of a Western, predominant idea of what it means to be a man or a woman. In addition, rather than segregating a discussion of transgender issues into a chapter on sexuality or biology, *Questioning Gender* integrates these concerns throughout in discussions about a wide variety of topics, including socialization, work, and dating.

The final distinctive approach in *Questioning Gender* is the integration of theoretical perspectives throughout the text. Many textbooks cover theory in the first few chapters and then move on to a topical focus on gender. In this book, theory is covered in early chapters, but it is then discussed throughout the book as each theory applies to different topics. This approach reminds students of the importance of theory to our understanding of gender, and it models for them how different theories might be applied to different topics related to gender. Other key

features of the text, as defined in the next section, such as Cultural Artifacts, Think About It question boxes, and Big Questions, all incorporate theory. In this way, *Questioning Gender* seeks to put theory at the center of discussions of gender rather than at the periphery.

## KEY FEATURES OF THE TEXT

### Cultural Artifacts

Also distributed throughout the text are Cultural Artifact boxes. The premise of using cultural artifacts is adapted from an assignment I use in my own classroom in which students have to bring in some artifact related to gender to share with the class once over the course of the semester. These gender artifacts are anything they observe that is related to gender and have included television commercials, YouTube clips, magazine articles, print advertisements, comic strips, viral e-mails, conversations, sports equipment (men's and women's basketballs), and personal hygiene products (men's and women's shampoo, deodorant, razors). Cultural Artifact boxes attempt to accomplish the same goal as this class assignment in encouraging students to begin to see gender all around them in their daily lives. Cultural Artifact boxes include references to films, television shows, music, websites, and video games as they help to illustrate key concepts discussed in the text. This feature helps students to make connections between sociological theories and concepts related to gender and the everyday world around them; this allows them to consider how gender matters in their daily lives.

### Big Questions

At the end of each chapter are Big Questions. Big Questions accomplish one of three goals. First, some Big Questions get students to apply concepts and theories to a broader set of issues or questions than those discussed in that particular chapter. These often take the form of "what if" questions, and they ask students to expand in directions only hinted at in the chapter. On a smaller scale, some Big Questions ask students to think about integrating concepts and ideas within the chapter. An example might be looking at how two different theories discussed in the chapter fit together or how a theory applied to one particular topic in the chapter might work when applied to a different topic. Finally, some Big Questions encourage students to make connections between concepts, theories, or topics discussed in that particular chapter with those discussed in other chapters in the book. All of these different types of questions encourage students to think of the "big picture" as it relates to gender and address some of the larger themes identified in the book. They encourage students and instructors to use the book interactively by making their own connections between different concepts and ideas within the book as well as by expanding beyond the topics covered in the book. Big Questions may be used as the basis for longer, critical-thinking essays; as essay examination questions; or as prompts for small-group discussions or debate exercises.

### Gender Exercises

Gender Exercises are more interactive than Big Questions and encourage students to embark on their own projects of gender inquiry. Gender Exercises suggest ways in which students could

use social science techniques like interviews, observation, surveys, and statistics to investigate gender for themselves. They also introduce exercises that help students apply theory to a particular situation from their own lives or popular culture to understand that theory better. In Chapter 7 on gender and bodies, a Gender Exercise asks students to visit a local art museum or look at images of art online and think about how male and female bodies are depicted. Gender Exercises could be used by students and instructors as the basis for research projects or research exercises. These exercises help encourage students to become active learners and to engage in social science research techniques.

### What Can You Do? Resources for Social Change

Students reading about gender inequality and other ways in which the gender system lets us down are sometimes impatient for ways in which they can take action to make things better. They ask, "What can I do?" Lists of websites at the ends of most chapters provide a starting point for students interested in exploring social change. These websites highlight organizations both national and global. All are dedicated to addressing a wide variety of social problems related to gender. In Chapter 7, students can explore the wide variety of initiatives pursued by the National Women's Health Network. OutRight Action International, one of the organizations listed in Chapter 5, advocates LGBTQ rights on a global scale. For instructors, these lists provide a potential starting point for more in-depth research projects about gender issues as well as for the inclusion of service learning activities.

### Terms and Suggested Readings

Important terms and concepts are highlighted and included in a list at the end of each chapter. This feature helps students and instructors to organize information presented in the chapter with the goal of learning how to apply these terms and concepts to other gender issues and situations. Each chapter also includes a list of suggested readings organized by different topics covered in that chapter. This can serve as a resource for students and instructors interested in finding out more about some of the issues discussed in the chapters and as a good starting place for student research papers.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

### Part I: What Are the Important Questions to Ask About Gender?

These first three chapters set up the basic foundations for an exploration of gender. They introduce the main goals in learning about gender, the basic theories that help us to understand gender, and the ways in which those theories are used throughout the text. Chapter 1 introduces and defines basic concepts in the exploration of gender and discusses why the study of gender is a worthwhile pursuit. Chapter 2 explores the feminist background of many gender theories and outlines sociological theories of gender. In Chapter 3, we explore gender theories from disciplines outside sociology, including psychology, queer theory, development theory, and ecofeminist theories of gender.

### Part II: How Are Our Lives Filled With Gender?

This section focuses on everyday aspects of gender through a more interactional, micro-level approach to issues. In this part of the book, students begin to consider the ways in which gender matters in their daily lives and how that impact is socially constructed historically and globally. In Chapter 4, we explore questions related to socialization and theories that explain how we learn to be gendered. The gender of sexuality is explored in Chapter 5, where we look at the complicated ways in which sexuality and gender intersect. Chapter 6 explores the gender of friendship in dating, including the different ways in which attraction works on a global scale and how the gender of friendship has changed over time. In Chapter 7, we look at the gender of bodies, including issues of body image and health.

### Part III: How Is Gender an Important Part of the Way Our Society Works?

This portion of *Questioning Gender* moves toward a focus on how gender permeates various institutions in society. Working at the institutional, macro level, these chapters are more concerned with how gender operates as a system of power and reinforces inequality. In Chapter 8, we examine the important intersections between gender, marriage, and families, taking a historical look at how marriage as an institution has changed over time and how this has affected ideas about gender. Chapter 9 looks at how the institution of the workplace has gendered implications, including a consideration of sex segregation and the gender wage gap. The unique intersections between gender and the media as an institution are examined in Chapter 10. Finally, Chapter 11 explores gender in the realm of states and governments through a consideration of the politics of gender.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

Like many other authors, I chose to capitalize "Black" but not "white" in this textbook. Being Black in America constitutes an ethnic group, similar in its sense of belonging and group cohesion to Irish Americans, Arab Americans, and many other groups. Being white in the United States generally does not carry with it this sense of ethnic identity and belonging, although ethnic identities such as Polish, Italian, or German might. Although both categories are socially constructed and have no underlying scientific basis, I chose to mark this distinction in how the categories are experienced.

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PART

I

# WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT GENDER?

# 1 WHAT IS GENDER AND WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT IT?

## Introducing Gender

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **1.1** Describe what it means to "see gender."
- **1.2** Identify approaches to considering the difference between sex and gender.
- **1.3** Understand arguments behind social constructionist views of gender.
- **1.4** Explain why it is important to study gender.

What do students expect when they sit down on the first day in a class on sociology and gender? What notions do they already have about what gender is and how it matters? How important do they believe gender is to their own lives? What are the stories they tell themselves about gender? These are questions I often ask *myself* about gender, and let me just say at the outset, I certainly don't claim to have all the answers. Learning about gender inevitably involves learning about yourself and your own life. When we combine gender and sociology, it also involves learning about the importance of social forces as they relate to gender. When you begin to think seriously about the impact of gender on your life and the larger world, it becomes difficult not to see gender everywhere you look. You can decide for yourself whether that's a good or a bad thing, but I believe that being aware of the ways in which gender permeates our lives can give us invaluable insight into the world.

## SWIMMING WITH THE FISHES: LEARNING TO SEE GENDER

Part of what we will be doing throughout this book is learning to see gender in the world around us. That might seem like a fairly stupid goal at first; most of us believe that we can see gender in the world. Let's imagine we're standing on a busy sidewalk in a city somewhere. As the people walk by, we believe we can identify the gender of most of them with a fairly high degree of certainty. Every now and then, someone might walk by who gives us pause, but by and large, we believe that we're pretty good at **gender attribution**, or reading the many different cues people present in order to decide whether someone is a woman or a man (even though limiting ourselves to these two categories could leave out a lot of people, as we'll discuss later). This chapter will begin to cast some doubt on whether what we're seeing when people walk by is really gender, as well as how useful it is to put people into gender categories in the first place.

But we'll also begin to extend exactly what we mean by *seeing gender*. Seeing gender the way we'll talk about it involves more than just identifying the gender of the people around us. It means beginning to reveal the ways in which gender works, which are not always apparent on the surface of our lives. This is what Judith Lorber (1994) means when she describes gender as being like water to fish. For many people who study this topic, gender is the substance that's all around us and inside us but that we largely take for granted. Learning to see gender means developing a special kind of vision.

## Gender, the Binary, and the Social Construction of Reality

One particularly useful tool that sociologists have to help us develop this kind of gender vision is called *the social construction of reality*. If you've taken sociology classes before, there's a strong chance you've heard of this concept. The social construction of reality describes the historical process by which our experiences of the world are put into categories and treated as real things (Roy, 2001). What does this mean in relation to gender?

Probably the best way to help us understand the social construction of reality as it relates to gender is to use the **Thomas principle**, from W. I. and Dorothy Thomas (1928), which states, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 572).

Take the gender binary, for example. In many places, like the United States, people believe that there are two and only two types of people in the world—women and men. This belief in two discrete categories that describe the gender of everyone is what we call the **gender binary**. Many people believe the binary is natural and universal. There have always been two types of people—males and females—and there always will be.

In reality, a binary gender system is just one among many possible ways of organizing gender categories. For example, in Anglo-European societies up until roughly the 17th century, a one-gender system was dominant. Experts believed that instead of two inherently different types of people—women and men—there was one type of person—men—and then lesser versions of that person. In this hierarchy, men were at the pinnacle, with groups like women, slaves, eunuchs, and dwarves below them.

For the Ancient Greeks and other cultures where the one-gender system was dominant, women were merely lesser versions of men. This cultural belief affected how they understood anatomical differences. Under a one-gender system, the penis and the vagina are not different organs. Rather, a vagina is a penis turned inward. Both women and men have paired reproductive glands located in their lower abdomen. We call these ovaries in women and gonads in men. The Greeks labeled them the same organ with slight variations and called both of them gonads. The one-gender system demonstrates how a society's beliefs about what gender is and how it works affects how they see real physical differences.

The existence of gender variant categories in many cultures also demonstrates how the binary is socially constructed. **Gender variant categories** are systems that institutionalize social roles and identities that extend beyond a binary, allowing for the existence of more than two gender categories. Many Native American tribes include a two-spirit role, in which a child who was assigned male or female at birth can live as a different gender. Two-spirits become not quite women and not quite men. They are a third option for fitting into the gender system. Similar gender categories exist around the world and demonstrate that a two-gender system isn't the only option.

These are just several ways that demonstrate that the binary is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a biological reality, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have real consequences, often life-or-death consequences. Because people in the United States believe in the binary, they attempt to enforce it by preventing transgender people from using bathrooms that match their gender identity or from getting access to gender-affirming medical care or from playing sports as their gender identity. Categories, like the binary, that are socially constructed must be maintained and patrolled so that people can go on believing that they are real. This is part of what's at stake in the battles over the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and other gender-nonconforming people. Their existence threatens the strength of the binary.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Does thinking of a category as based in biology change the discrimination people in that category face? Are people less likely to be prejudiced against a certain group if they believe the identity is biological and, therefore, out of our control? Has this been true for social categories in the past?*

Once we understand the ways in which the world around us is socially constructed, we can begin to untangle the complex ways in which our understanding of the world is shaped by our particular social constructions. Understanding the social construction of gender helps us to see the water in which we're swimming as well as to understand why we didn't notice it in the first place.

In this book, we use two specific methods to see the social constructions around us. The first, which we've already considered in our discussion of race, is a *historical* approach. Part of what makes things seem real is the sense that this is how they always have been and how they always will be. A historical approach helps us see that this is very often not the case.

The second approach that helps us reveal social constructions is *cross-cultural*. If something that you very much believe is real in your particular culture is perceived as ridiculously impossible in another culture, what exactly is real? Cross-culturally, racial categories become even more complicated. In many Latin American countries, members of the same family can be categorized in different racial groups based on their skin color; this means that your sibling may be considered white while you are considered Black. Many people around the world find that their racial category changes as they move from place to place and country to country. What does this say about the reality of these categories? Throughout this book, we use both the historical approach and the cross-cultural approach to help us see the ways in which gender is also socially constructed.

### Gender and Intersectionality

There's another perspective that draws our attention to the variations in experiences of gender, this time across intersecting categories such as race, social class, sexuality, age, and disability. It's called **intersectionality**, and it's both a theoretical orientation and a frame for activism. We'll discuss intersectionality in more depth in Chapter 2, but for now, it's important to understand

the way intersectionality draws our attention to variations and contradictions in the way people in different social categories experience gender. An intersectional approach pushes us to avoid blanket statements about all men or all women in favor of asking questions about *which* women or *which* men? When we talk about the privileges men have as a group, does that include all men or mostly white, cisgender, straight, middle-class men? How would the experiences of an Asian American transgender man be different? Intersectionality makes us aware that we do not experience all our overlapping identities separately. We are always simultaneously gendered *and* raced, classed, sexualized, and embodied. To understand how gender works, we must understand it in its full complexity, as it intersects with other identities.

## SEX OR GENDER: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

By now, you might have noticed an important relationship between biology and our perceptions of reality; the binary is perceived as something that's real because many people believe in its biological truth. This is true in many parts of the world where science forms a dominant way of thinking about the world. If something is rooted in our biology, it can be empirically and objectively observed and must, therefore, be real. Later, we'll explore the way in which even our trust in science is gendered and has gender implications.

Biological explanations of gender differences are often called on to establish their reality, and this brings us to our first point of vocabulary, the difference between *sex* and *gender*.

When I ask students in my sociology of gender class early in the semester what the difference is between sex and gender, they usually agree that sex describes the biological differences between women and men while gender pertains to the social differences. Although not everyone follows this general usage, this is a fairly accurate description of how social scientists have employed these terms.

Sex has been used to describe the biological differences between people we call males and people we call females; gender is the social meanings layered onto those differences. This neat division leaves sex category up to those concerned with biology and gender up to those interested in the social world. For much of the history of the study of gender in the Anglo-European world, this was a standard way of understanding sex and gender, and it was called a biosocial approach.

### A Biosocial Approach

A **biosocial approach** to the study of gender acknowledges that much of what we experience regarding gender is socially constructed. There are differences in how gender as a social category is constructed across historical time periods and across different places. However, from the biosocial perspective, there are real limits to that social construction because of the biological reality of male and female bodies. One way to understand this perspective is to say that biosocialists believe in **sexual dimorphism**. Sexual dimorphism is the claim that sex marks a distinction between two physically and genetically discrete categories of people.

If you subscribe to sexual dimorphism, you believe that we can use certain characteristics to sort people objectively into two categories called male and female. Discrete here means that you can only be one or the other (male or female) and not both at the same time. This sorting usually happens when you're born and someone, usually a doctor, decides whether you're a girl or a boy. This process is called **gender assignment**. Biosocialists do not believe that our sex category is the only thing that determines how we interact with the world; gender is constructed onto the differences we call sex. But they do believe that there are two kinds of people in the world—females and males.

At this point, you might be thinking to yourself, *Well, duh! Everyone knows there are two types of people in the world—women and men!* Or maybe you're thinking, *That's stupid! What about transgender and nonbinary people? Where do they fit in?* The belief in sexual dimorphism is being chipped away at in today's society, but still, many people believe that sex category is a real thing and that sorting people into two categories is a simple, straightforward thing. But is it?

What can we see of sex category in our everyday lives? We can see the shape of people's bodies and their faces. If someone has breasts, does that mean the person is a woman? Is that a criterion we could use? Yes, except that some men have breasts (or there would have been no need for Kramer, a character on the hit sitcom *Seinfeld*, to invent the "bro," a bra for men), and some women do not. What about facial hair? We can certainly see facial hair. And yet, again, some men do not have facial hair, and some women do. In her study of trans men in the workplace, Kristen Schilt (2010) found that facial hair often trumped several other gender clues pointing toward femininity in gender attribution for trans men. That is, even if someone could see a feminine name and the presence of breasts, the presence of facial hair meant they'd still refer to that person as *he*.

What about an Adam's apple? That could be a gender indicator. Again, not all men have them, and not all women lack them. On average, women should be slightly shorter than men, but we also encounter very short men and very tall women. Schilt would argue that what we're really seeing when we look for sex category is **cultural genitalia**, or the outward performance of gender that we then assume to match up with biological genitalia.

## A Strong Social Constructionist Approach

Unlike a biosocial approach, the **strong social constructionist approach** argues that both sex *and* gender are socially constructed. In fact, you might argue from this perspective that gender—social meanings—is really all there is. Our gender beliefs cause us to think there are real categories out there called "female" and "male," but the reality is much more complex. Sex category itself is socially constructed, and therefore, it is culture that dictates how we understand sex.

### Gender and Bodies

There are at least four areas of evidence in support of this perspective. The *first type* of evidence points our attention to the ways in which biological differences can be influenced by social reality. This helps us see how the social can influence the biological. For example, one biological difference between women and men is that, on average, men have 20% to 30% greater bone mass and strength than women (Wade & Ferree, 2015). Keep in mind that, as we discuss more in Chapter

3, average differences mean that there's still a great deal of overlap. Some women have greater bone mass and strength than some men, and some men have lesser bone mass and strength than some women. Differences in the average population emerge only after puberty and become more pronounced when women lose bone mass after menopause (Avdagić et al., 2009). This biological reality explains why women over the age of 50 are 4 times more likely to be diagnosed with osteoporosis than men of the same age (International Osteoporosis Foundation, 2015).

But studies suggest that somewhere between 10% and 50% of the differences in bone mass can be due to lifestyle choices such as diet, physical activity, and smoking rather than genetics (Office of the Surgeon General, 2004). In fact, one study shows that among Orthodox Jewish adolescent boys, the development of bone mass proceeds very differently. In these communities, boys spend a great deal of their childhoods engaged in the intensive study of religious documents. This means they spend much less time being physically active. As a result, their bones fail to grow as strong as the bones of their sisters, who are freed by this particular set of gender norms to spend more time running, jumping, and playing.

In this community, socially constructed ideas about gender—that boys should spend much of their time studying religious texts while girls should spend less time in such activities—has an effect on the physical bodies of girls and boys and, eventually, women and men. The beliefs of the Orthodox Jewish community—their social reality—are imprinted onto the physical bodies of their daughters and sons. Gender shapes sex.

Another biological reality students in my classes often point to is research on brain differences between women and men. Women, they might point out, have smaller brains, different brain composition, and different brain function (Halpern, 2012). It is true that there are some differences in the brains of women and men, but it's important to note here that it's increasingly difficult to tell if these differences are genetic or shaped by our environments, including our social environment.

New findings suggest that our brains have a great deal of plasticity, or ability to change and respond to the environment. This plasticity includes changes in the structure and function of our brains. Studies show that it might be easier than we previously thought to alter brain function. In one study, 3 months of playing the video game *Tetris* among young girls resulted in brains that were heavier and showed enhanced cortical thickness (Haier et al., 2009).

The same complexity applies to hormones, which are often believed to be a biological identifier of sex category. New research tells us that the production and presence of hormones are influenced by social interaction. Men's testosterone levels decrease if they are in close relationships with women and are actively involved with their children (Alvergne et al., 2009; Booth et al., 2006; Gettler et al., 2011; Mazur & Booth, 1998; Storey et al., 2000; van Anders & Watson, 2007). In societies in which it's normal for fathers to be involved parents, men's average testosterone levels are lower than in societies where it's not normal (Muller et al., 2009). Position in a hierarchy can affect testosterone levels as well. Being suddenly positioned below others in a hierarchy, as at the beginning of boot camp, is correlated with a drop in testosterone that can last for several weeks (Kreuz & Rose, 1972; Thompson et al., 1990). This research suggests that the relationship between the social world and our biological bodies is much more complicated and interactive than any simplistic description.

Studies like these suggest that we need a more complex way of thinking about the relationship between the social and the biological. This new model would acknowledge that though our underlying biology is important and can't be discounted, the interaction between our bodies and the social environment does not flow in one causal direction. As strong social constructionists argue, our social beliefs can have a crucial impact on bodies—our bones, brains, and muscles, for example. Our social reality is written onto the physical stuff of our biological bodies.

### Intersex and the Social Construction of Sex

A *second type* of evidence for the strong social constructionist approach comes from the experiences of intersex individuals. If we accept the claims of sexual dimorphism, we should be able to come up with some universal criteria for sorting everyone into a sex category. But strong social constructionists point to the ways in which not everyone fits so easily into categories of male and female or man and woman. If we start by defining men as people with penises and women as people with vaginas, we'll quickly discover that some people have both. Where do they fit?

People born with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) have XX chromosomes but masculinization of the genitalia. As infants, these babies have what appears to be a penis as well as a vagina. Individuals born with androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) have XY chromosomes but feminized genitalia, which often means they have a vagina as well as testes (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

As we will read in Chapter 4, these infants are unlikely to make it into adulthood with their genitalia intact because doctors in the United States usually perform surgery on intersex infants to create a consistent sex category for them. Thus, the infant with CAH is likely to have their penis removed, whereas the infant with AIS is likely to be raised as a girl despite the presence of testes and the development of masculine secondary sex characteristics at puberty.

Gender scholars identify individuals who have any of a wide number of variations of genitalia, hormones, internal anatomy, or chromosomes that are outside the typical male/female binary as intersex. Intersex variations are estimated to occur at a rate of 1.7% of all births, making intersex infants more common than albinism (being born albino or lacking skin pigmentation). In a city of 300,000 people, 5,100 of them would have intersex variations.

We could say that although we can't necessarily see sex category with the naked eye, we live in the 21st century; there are other ways to determine sex. There are internal sex organs. Today, medical doctors generally use the presence or absence of a penis to initially assign gender. In the past, doctors went by internal organs and emphasized the presence or absence of a uterus, because without a uterus, a woman could not reproduce.

But intersex variations deal with both internal and external genitalia. Some intersex individuals have both an ovary and a testis, one on each side of their body. In other individuals, the ovary and testis grow together, forming an ovo-testis. The presence or absence of internal sex organs is also an imperfect method of determining sex category.

What about hormones, then? What we call sex hormones are not differentiated in children before they reach puberty, and postpuberty, there are wide variations in the presence and absence of sex hormones. Individuals with androgen insensitivity syndrome have testosterone in their bodies, but they cannot metabolize it and, therefore, develop breasts at puberty. Is the presence of testosterone, then, a good measure of who's a man and who's a woman? What about

genetics? As we learn in high school biology, men have XY sex chromosomes while women have XX sex chromosomes. Does modern genetic testing provide a definitive answer to sex category? No. Those born with Turner syndrome lack a second sex chromosome, making them XO, whereas those with Klinefelter's syndrome have two X chromosomes and a Y (XXY). How should we identify the sex of someone who is XXY or XO?

### Transgender People and the Social Construction of Sex

To the complications that intersex variations bring to the idea of sex category, you might also add the complexities of the transgender community as a *third type* of evidence for the strong social constructionist approach. **Transgender** is a broad label that includes a wide variety of people who seek to change, cross, or go beyond culturally defined gender categories (Ferber et al., 2008). The term includes many ways to express gender, not all of which line up with the binary sex categories of female and male.

Some transgender individuals seek surgery to change their underlying anatomy. For example, a trans man is someone who was assigned a feminine gender when they were born but whose gender identity is masculine. Other transgender people identify as nonbinary, which means their gender identity is neither masculine nor feminine. Agender individuals have no gender. Children as young as 4 or 5 years old express that the gender they were assigned at birth does not match their internal sense of who they are. People who live outside or beyond the binary have always existed, throughout human history and across cultures. How do we fit this reality into a biosocial approach, in which sex category is supposed to provide a real limit on the ways in which gender is expressed?

### Historical and Cross-Cultural Evidence

Strong social constructionists also use the historical and cross-cultural approaches as evidence, pointing to the ways in which sex categories have, in fact, varied across time and place. These examples make up our *fourth type* of evidence. As we've already seen, the ancient Greeks believed in a one-gender model (Roy, 2001). In some cultures, the categories that Anglo-Europeans label "gender" or "sex" may be very different from our own conceptions of what those categories mean, leading some scholars to wonder if gender really exists at all in these places. Increasingly, historical and cross-cultural evidence suggest that the idea of a binary gender system is far from universal. The same biological reality leads to very different cultural conclusions depending on where and when you are.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Think of a behavioral trait that is generally associated with one sex or the other (for example, crying, fighting, looking pretty, nurturing). Can you think of examples of females who engage in the behaviors generally associated with males or of males who engage in the behaviors generally associated with females?*

Table 1.1 compares the biosocial and strong social constructionist approaches.

**TABLE 1.1 ■ Biosocial and Strong Social Constructionist Approaches Compared**

| Approach | Position on Sexual Dimorphism | View of Relationship Between Sex and Gender | Stance on Intersex and Transgender |
|---|---|---|---|
| Biosocial | There are two distinct, biologically discrete types of people, male and female; sexual dimorphism is true. | Sex partially produces gender and sets real limits on the expression of gender. | Aberrations must be fit into a dimorphic system. |
| Strong social constructionist | There are not two distinct types of people, male and female; sexual dimorphism is a claim but not the truth. | Gender produces sex; our ideas about gender shape how we make sense of biological reality. | Evidence demonstrates that the dimorphic system does not accurately describe reality where sex and gender are concerned. |

### Sex or Gender?

The debate between biosocial and strong social constructionist perspectives is ongoing, but it has important implications for how we think about the relationship between sex and gender. From the strong social constructionist perspective, we're always talking about gender because there really is no such thing as sex. This doesn't mean that biology doesn't exist and that people don't have bodies. It also doesn't mean that people don't have differences in their genitalia, DNA, sex hormones, and other biological realities. But for strong social constructionists, these biological differences do not line up with the categories we have created and labeled sex, and the claim that they do is false.

As sociologists who understand the importance of social construction, in this textbook, we assume a strong social constructionist perspective. This means that most of the time, we talk about gender rather than sex categories, assuming that both are socially constructed. We talk about women and men rather than females and males.

## A WORD ABOUT BIOLOGY AND STRONG SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The idea that sex categories are socially constructed—that there are *not* two kinds of distinguishable male and female bodies in the world—is hard to swallow for some people. Students are often left wondering whether biology exists at all from the strong social constructionist perspective. Are these theorists arguing that there are no such things as penises, vaginas, testes, hormones, or chromosomes? Are they saying that we don't have physical, biological bodies at all?

Most theorists who argue from the strong social constructionist point of view would say that, yes, of course we have physical bodies. The problem is that our categories—male and

female—don't accurately describe the reality of those physical bodies. In fact, many would argue that the diversity in our physical bodies is greater than our categories would lead us to believe. They might go so far as to argue that our belief in how bodies *should* be gets in the way of our perceiving the way bodies *actually are*. Because we believe that everyone should have a penis or a vagina, we tend to ignore the many cases of people who have both. Because we believe that the gender you're assigned at birth should line up with the gender you live, we stigmatize transgender people who violate these norms.

In other words, strong social constructionists believe that our social ideas about what sex categories should look like get in the way of our seeing what the actual biological reality is.

## WHY STUDY GENDER?

This question—why study gender—brings us back to some of the questions with which we began this introduction. You may have your own reasons that bring you to this book, but the general answer to this question is that gender matters. Perhaps you've already noticed the ways in which gender matters in your own life. In this book, we push that understanding even further by raising questions about what gender is and how it operates. Our journey can be summarized with three main goals.

First, we'll be building an understanding of the ways in which gender is socially constructed in a global, historical, and intersectional context. One fundamental truth about gender that those who study this topic have arrived at is that gender varies a great deal based on where, when, and who you are. We'll be using all three perspectives to explore those complexities.

Our second goal in this textbook is to debunk any ideas about what is normal and abnormal in regard to gender. We do this through looking at gender globally and by being intersectional—by placing the experiences of people of color, gay and lesbian people, transgender people, and working-class people at the center rather than at the margins of our inquiries. Looking at what it means to be a gay man or a Middle Eastern woman or a nonbinary white person should not teach us what it means to be different from some unspoken norm (straight, white cis women and cis men), but it should help reveal the unique lessons to be learned about gender in the experiences of many different kinds of people.

Because of this goal, the particular language we use to talk about different experiences and places in the world is important. The term *Western* assumes a geographic centering but also an economic and social one. Societies are Western if they see Europe as the center of the world, and this terminology derives from colonial philosophy. We generally use the term *Western* or *Anglo-European* when we refer to cultural phenomena. But you will also hear terminology like *developing* and *developed* or *global North* and *global South*, which reflect different ways of understanding global divisions.

We emphasize the social construction of gender, but remember from the Thomas principle that just because something is socially constructed doesn't mean it has no real consequences for people's lives. Gender might be socially constructed, but it is also a system of inequality; understanding gender in this light is the third goal we pursue. What we believe about gender has real consequences for the lives of people around the world. Gender distributes power to people. As

we will explore, it may cut short the lives of many men; cause some women to live with the fear of physical assault; and influence how much pleasure you experience in your sexual life, how much money you make, and how much leisure time you have.

When we begin to see gender around us, we will also begin to see the ways in which gender sometimes works to help some and hurt others. But we argue that as a system that distributes privilege, gender can negatively affect everyone at some point in their lives. For many people who study gender, the answer to the question "Why study gender?" is that understanding gender is the first step toward deciding what needs to be changed and then taking action.

There are a lot of questions about gender to be asked and a lot of answers to be explored. Many answers contradict each other. During one semester of my sociology of gender course, a student complained after class that his head hurt—not because of a hangover or too much yelling but because the class was making him think too much. Can you think too much about gender? Perhaps. Sometimes students are frustrated by the lack of easy answers when it comes to gender, but asking questions seems to be the first step in finding out something that's truly meaningful to you, and that is what we seek to do in this book.

## KEY TERMS

Biosocial approach
Cultural genitalia
Gender assignment
Gender attribution
Gender binary
Gender variant categories
Intersectionality
Sexual dimorphism
Strong social constructionist approach
Thomas principle
Transgender

# 2 WHAT'S THE "SOCIOLOGY" IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER?

## Understanding Sociology and Gender

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **2.1** Explain why learning theories is important in the study of gender.
- **2.2** Understand what feminism is and why it's often been perceived as a threat throughout history.
- **2.3** Describe theories that explain gender from a sociological perspective.
- **2.4** Understand the difference between social roles and sex roles.
- **2.5** Explain some ways theorists believe interactions within groups can be important to individuals' understanding of gender.
- **2.6** Discuss gendered organizations and how they establish ideas of gender in society.
- **2.7** Summarize why integrative approaches to gender help explain how gender operates on different levels.

## WHY DO YOU NEED THEORY TO UNDERSTAND GENDER?

"Theory" can be a scary word for a lot of people, suggesting big ideas that exist above and beyond our everyday experiences, floating up on a cloud of higher understanding. Learning and understanding gender theories becomes a little less scary when you realize that everyone already has some working theory about gender and the way it operates in the world. From the first moment someone said to you as a small child, "That's what girls do and not what boys do," you probably began to develop your own explanation for why that was so.

As we get older, our theories about how gender works become more sophisticated. They may be grounded in a sense that we act in gendered ways because of our biology or because that's what everyone around us seems to expect. Our theories about gender may come from our inability to fit the existing system and a sense that something isn't right about this whole thing called gender.

As you learn the theoretical approaches various people have developed in relation to gender, there's a strong possibility that some of them will sound familiar and that others will make less sense to you. This is likely because some theories match more or less closely the working theory you've already developed. Regardless of the specific content of your own theories about gender,

we all have a general sense of what gender is and how it works, and at a basic level, this is what a theory is—a set of statements and propositions that seek to explain or predict a particular aspect of social life (Newman, 2016).

## Three Reasons to Learn Gender Theories

If we all already have our own theories about gender, then why is it important to learn theories that have been developed by other people? Why aren't our own personal theories good enough? There are three answers to that question.

*One answer* is that although we all have our own theories about gender, we may have never had the opportunity or inclination to test those theories in a meaningful and rigorous way. You can test your individual theory of gender against your own experiences, but as we've already discussed in Chapter 1, your own experiences are likely to be very different from those of people in other parts of the world and with other identities. For example, your theory may work well at explaining how two women in a marriage share the housework, but can it help explain the division of household labor between two men or a transgender couple or within a straight marriage ? Your theory may work for some situations in your own life but not for others.

Most of the theories we discuss in the next two chapters have been proposed by people who've had the time, opportunity, and inclination to develop their theories and to test their usefulness in a variety of ways, including conducting social research. Ideally, that research tests these theories in a variety of settings and situations, making the explanatory power of the theory that much greater. Throughout the book, you'll see these theories applied to specific situations to explain a wide variety of behaviors.

*A second reason* theory is important is that it helps us to test the explanatory "wings," so to speak, of our own way of understanding gender. You may have strong beliefs about your own particular theory of gender. But your ability to defend that belief depends on your being able to demonstrate why your beliefs are right and others are wrong. Learning theory forces you to seriously consider the strengths and weaknesses of your own way of thinking. This happens through gaining a thorough and workable understanding of how other theories work.

Why? Because to demonstrate that another theory is wrong, you have to have a pretty good understanding of what it says and how it works. You may read about doing gender in this chapter and not at all agree with the way in which doing-gender theorists understand gender. But developing your own explanation for why doing-gender theory is wrong requires that you further develop your own way of understanding gender in response to those ideas.

In other words, it's not enough to simply say someone else's explanation of gender inequality is wrong; you must be able first to demonstrate *how* they're wrong and then to demonstrate how *your* explanation is better. If you think of your own way of understanding gender as a set of wings you've constructed for yourself to navigate through life, learning other theories about gender is like putting those wings through a series of test flights to see whether they really work.

*The final reason* it's important to learn theories about gender has to do with our own ability to see and understand the world accurately. Can we trust our vision of the world? Is what we see true or real, and what does it mean to say something is *real*, anyway? Do the beliefs we may already have about gender influence what we see and feel?

For example, psychologists identify **confirmation bias** as our tendency to look for information that confirms our preexisting beliefs while ignoring information that contradicts those beliefs. If you believe gay men act more feminine, confirmation bias predicts that you will pay special attention to all the gay men you know or see who act more feminine while ignoring both the gay men who *don't* act feminine and the nongay men who *do* act feminine. Confirmation bias suggests that our own working theories of gender can serve as blinders, preventing us from seeing and considering certain gendered phenomena in our lives.

Learning about other theories is a way to remove those blinders through focusing our attention on aspects of gender that we might not otherwise have seen or noticed. Along these lines, many sociologists speak of using theory as a kind of lens through which to see the world. Like binoculars, magnifying lenses, microscopes, telescopes, and 3-D glasses, these different lenses provide us with different views of the world.

All three of these reasons suggest that learning theories of gender is important because these theories help us to become better thinkers in general—and especially better thinkers as related to issues of gender in our lives. So let's begin our exploration of theories of gender by looking at feminism and its influence on sociological ways of thinking about gender.

## Gender in Sociology Before Feminism

Sociology, like many of the traditional academic disciplines, was founded primarily by white, cisgender, upper-class, European, presumably heterosexual men. Early sociologists, such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, are credited with developing the foundations of sociological theory as a response to the problems they perceived in their own lifetimes—problems such as industrialization, urbanization, and the spread of capitalism.

But as feminists would later point out, their view of the world was inevitably shaped by their own positions as white, largely upper-class, heterosexual, European cis men. These men assumed that they were describing experiences and concepts that applied to everyone, regardless of their gender, race, class position, or sexuality; but as we will continue to discover in this book, there are problems with assuming any kind of universal experience.

Women and people of color were doing sociology alongside Weber and Durkheim, but not surprisingly given the long history of sexism and racism, their contributions were largely erased from the discipline. Max Weber's wife, Marianne Weber, was an important feminist, intellectual, and sociologist in her own right, publishing works on gender, motherhood, and marriage (Appelrouth & Edles, 2012). Jane Addams won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with poor, immigrant communities in Chicago and published many books describing her detailed research into the causes and consequences of poverty in American cities. W. E. B. DuBois, in addition to being the first Black man to earn a graduate degree from Harvard, also developed extensive theories of racial inequality and is believed to have influenced Weber's theory of status, but only recently have some sociologists included him as one of the central founders of the discipline.

Though early women sociologists like Jane Addams and Marianne Weber were including gender in their theories, their contributions were ignored and written out of the history of sociology, mostly because of their supposedly inferior status as women. The thoughts and ideas of white men were simply seen as more important and valid than those of women and people of color.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Are there still ways in your society in which men's experiences are assumed to be universal? Can you think of any specific examples of this tendency? How would our thinking be different if we assumed women's experiences were universal? For example, what if giving birth to children was assumed to be a basic, universal experience?*

The way in which the theories of Max Weber are still remembered but his wife Marianne's are largely forgotten brings us to a consideration of how power and privilege work in society. The white, male founders were in a privileged position because of their race and their status as men. **Privilege** is a set of mostly unearned rewards and benefits that come with a given status in society. Writer Roxane Gay (2014) calls privilege a peculiar benefit. As a Black, queer woman and a child of Haitian parents, Gay describes how even though she may lack certain benefits in the United States, she enjoyed many privileges relative to children in Haiti. Everyone has some privilege, and everyone lacks some privilege. The privilege W. E. B. DuBois may have had as a man was balanced against the lack of privilege he had as a Black man. Privilege, Gay and others tell us, is a complicated thing.

Privilege can take the form of actual rewards, such as the privilege of knowing that as a man, you can generally make much more than most women as a professional athlete or coach. Jill Ellis, coach of the three-time champion United States Women's National Soccer team, made $318,533 in 2018 compared to her male equivalent, Bruce Arena, who made $1.4 million during the same period even though his men's team failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup (Mertens, 2019). The WNBA's (Women's National Basketball Association) most valuable player in 2016, Sylvia Fowles, earned $109,000 for all her accomplishments. In the men's NBA (National Basketball Association), Leandro Barbosa was waived by the Phoenix Suns in 2017 and was still expected to make $500,000, 5 times as much as Fowles, even though he wouldn't be playing most of the season. In golf, the U.S. Women's Open in 2015 set a record for attendance as spectators watched Gee Chun win. Chun received $810,000 as an award from the U.S. Golf Association, while Jordan Spieth, the winner of the men's Open, got $1.8 million. In most sports, men have the privilege of being able to make more than women.

Privilege is trickier to identify when it signifies the absence of barriers that exist for less privileged people. If two white, upper-class women were to sit at a table at Starbucks without ordering anything, chances are that no one would call the police to have them removed. Yet when two Black men in Philadelphia did the same thing as they waited for a business meeting, the police were called, and the two men were arrested (Pomrenze & Simon, 2018).

Being able to appear in public places without having the police called to arrest you is an example of a barrier that is not faced by those in a privileged status to the same degree as it is by less privileged people in society. This kind of privilege has been described as functioning like the wind at your back if you're pedaling a bicycle (Wimsatt, 2001). Privilege, like the wind, makes moving through the world that much easier, and you might assume you're moving so quickly because of your own effort—your pedaling. You probably won't realize how helpful the wind at

your back was until you find yourself having to bike *into* the wind. It's difficult to realize what that's like until you've had to do it yourself—or maybe until you've talked to someone else who has had to do it.

Where does that leave us with the men in the field of sociology and their lack of concern about gender? Being mostly white, upper-class men allowed these sociologists to bike with the wind, and as far as they knew, everyone else was doing the same thing. Gender didn't seem important to them in part because its effect on their lives, although still important, was also less visible.

This is, in fact, another form of privilege. Part of the benefit of being in a privileged status is that you don't have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. Theorists like DuBois and Addams wrote about gender and race because they didn't have the privilege of ignoring its impact on their lives. Do people who live in places with reliable access to electricity and clean water think about how lucky they are to be living in a place with those benefits? Do people in the United States consider how convenient it is that people around the world know much more about American culture than the average American knows about other cultures? Probably not. Being American or from a place where these things are taken for granted is a privilege, and most people don't spend large chunks of their days thinking about the privileges they *have*.

White, cisgender, straight, male sociologists were privileged by their gender, and that meant they didn't have to spend a lot of time thinking about it. This is one small part of the reason those male sociologists did not seriously consider gender (or race or sexuality) and an important lesson in the blinding properties of privilege. Privilege, in fact, is one of the reasons we need to be cautious in trusting the reality and objectivity of our own views about gender, and it is therefore another reason learning gender theories can be useful.

## FEMINIST THEORIES AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SOCIOLOGICAL THINKING ABOUT GENDER

Across history, cultures, and civilizations, when women have asserted their power and asked for equality, it has almost always been perceived as dangerous. It is important to remember that the various versions of feminism we discuss are just one manifestation of a long, global history of questioning the gender status quo and advocating the rights of women. Women in Kenya organized to fight the effects of colonial governments on their livelihood in 1948, and women in India were involved in working for their own rights along with their country's independence long before it was achieved in 1947 (Basu, 1995).

Neither of these groups of women would have described themselves as feminists, though. Feminism, in all its many forms, assumes certain models of what it means to be a woman, what the goals of women should be relative to their status, and how to go about achieving those goals. But the feminist model, although it continues to expand and adapt to fit the diverse needs of women and men across the world, is, like sociology, a product of Anglo-European thought. For much of its history, feminism has been defined by white, cisgender, straight, upper-class, European women. This feminism has often ignored or sidelined critiques of racism, classism, colonialism, cissexism, and homophobia. It's important that we not ignore that history.

Globally, women define their own interests and goals differently, and they sometimes perceive feminism as another attempt by the global North to make the rest of the world into their own image (Basu, 1995). Given this history, we should remember that those particular ideologies we label as feminism do not describe the totality of how women think about or organize in their own interests globally, as we explore throughout this book. For now, because we're focusing on the relationship between feminism and sociological thought, we'll be talking about feminism and women's movements as they developed mainly in the Anglo-European world.

In the 21st century, calling yourself a feminist is less stigmatized than it was in the past, as pop icons like Beyoncé and Taylor Swift now label themselves feminists. A 2016 poll found that 6 in 10 women and one-third of men identified themselves as feminists or strong feminist. Among women ages 18 to 34, 63% identified as strong feminist or feminist. These numbers suggest that feminism is increasingly popular among younger generations. But negative stereotypes about feminism persist. In the same poll, 46% of people believed feminism blames men for women's challenges (Cai & Clement, 2016).

Regardless of attitudes toward the label, feminism is integral to any discussion of gender and especially to a sociological exploration of gender. So what exactly is feminism, and why is it seen as so dangerous around the world?

## The First Wave of the Feminist Movement

Feminists generally divide their discussion of feminism as a social movement into three periods, though it's important to keep in mind that the reality on the ground is much more complicated. Women active during the first wave lived long enough to be part of the second wave as well. The lines we draw between one wave and the next can be arbitrary but are helpful as a framework for understanding feminism historically.

The first wave of feminism coincided with suffrage movements in both Europe and the United States (Taylor et al., 2004). This is different from the history of women's movements in most of the global South simply because nearly all the men and women in these nations were deprived of the right to vote or govern themselves by colonial powers. Women's suffrage, when it came, was often connected to suffrage for native peoples more generally. This first phase in the women's movement in the Anglo-European world is specific to the historical context of existing democracies in which male (and, in the United States, *white* male) citizens had long ago achieved the right to vote.

The early suffragettes were a diverse group in both their backgrounds and their goals, but many of their efforts focused primarily on enfranchisement, or getting women the right to vote. Gaining an expanded role for women in the workforce was another important goal for white, middle-class women, who largely did *not* do paid work outside the home. Suffragettes such as Sojourner Truth, a former slave who served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, drew attention to the differing experiences among women of the first wave.

As a former slave, Sojourner Truth never had the luxury of *not* working, and the kind of work she did was considered "men's work" by many of the white suffragettes—although she was certainly never paid for it. As would be the case throughout the history of the feminist movement, the way women were positioned in society often led to a different outlook on what

the main problems faced by women in society were and how to go about fixing those problems. Though many suffragettes were also Abolitionists, there were disagreements about the relative priority of women's right to vote versus the right of freed slaves, even though Black women like Sojourner Truth existed at the intersection of these identities. Regardless of these differences, the first-wave movement was successful in gaining the right to vote for women in 1920 in the United States (and in 1928 in England, but not until 1944 in France).

## The Second Wave of the Feminist Movement

When most people in the 21st century think of feminism, their frame of reference is the second wave of the feminist movement that began in the 1960s in the global North. This movement was part of a larger, global social movement cycle that included independence movements in the developing world as well as the civil rights movement in the United States. There were many interconnections among these different movements. For example, some women who got their initial social movement experience within the civil rights movement in the United States moved on to the women's movement. In the developing world, women worked within nationalist movements to throw off colonial rule and establish democracies. Although they often included women's rights within those larger agendas, these movements were necessarily different because of the historical context of the postcolonial world.

To understand this second wave of feminism is to understand that, as with all social movements, there was no one movement, no one group, and often no single, unanimously agreed-upon agenda. Organizations such as NOW (the National Organization for Women) focused on passing legislation in the United States that would have institutionalized the prevention of gender discrimination. One way they tried to accomplish this goal was through passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).

**Consciousness-raising** also became an important part of the movement as feminists focused on finding connections between their personal lives and the politics of gender. For many feminists, the development of their theories of gender was inextricably grounded in an examination of their personal lives, and this work was just as important, if not more important, than changing institutions such as the government. Charlotte Bunch epitomized this connection when she wrote in 1968, "There is no private domain of a person's life that is not political and no political issue that is not ultimately personal. The old barriers have fallen" (Bordo, 2003, p. 17). From these examinations of the connections between the personal and the political came a focus on issues such as women's rights in the workplace (including the right to be free from sexual harassment), domestic violence, reproductive rights, and sexual violence.

## The Third Wave of the Feminist Movement

Third-wave feminism was, in many ways, a response to the contradictions of second-wave feminism. Emerging during the 1980s and 1990s, third-wave feminism encompassed a diverse range of theories and orientations among both academics and activists. The voices of women of color, who were a strong influence in all three waves of the feminist movement, were strongest in the development of third-wave feminism. Women such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins,

Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Aurora Levins Morales, and Rebecca Walker questioned essentialist tendencies in feminism, or the tendency to assume some universal experience of being a woman. They fought to organize around issues of race, sexual orientation, and social class in addition to gender.

The third wave is characterized in many ways by coming to terms with and being up front about the many contradictions that always lay beneath the surface of feminism as it developed. For example, postcolonialism influenced feminism in the third wave by drawing attention to the ways in which women had ignored the experiences of women outside the Anglo-European world. This examination raised questions about whether women could claim one global movement or whether the interests and goals of women in the global North and global South were so different and opposed as to make any umbrella movement impossible. Third-wave feminism, rather than ignoring or suppressing these types of questions, embraced them as crucial to the next phase of achieving gender equality.

## The Fourth Wave of the Feminist Movement

Are we currently living in a fourth wave of the feminist movement? If we are, what's the difference between this latest feminist movement and those of the past? Scholars have been heralding a fourth wave since as far back as 1986. But more recently, a series of events and activism have converged into a critical mass of activism. The Women's March in 2016 on the day after Donald Trump's inauguration became the largest single-day protest in U.S. history. Estimates suggest that between 3 million and 5 million people participated in all sister marches across the United States that day and that a total of 7 million people marched worldwide in 81 other countries (Hortocollis & Alcindor, 2017; Women's March, 2016). In the 2018 midterm elections in the United States, a record-setting number of women ran for political office (and won). Also in 2018, the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment of women in the workplace swept across social media. That use of the hashtag was not the first iteration of the movement, which was first used by Black activist Tarana Burke (Olheiser, 2017). The hashtag, along with the cascade of women going public with their stories of harassment by famous and powerful men ranging from Harvey Weinstein to Garrison Keillor to Al Franken, resulted in the formation of Time's Up, an organization to systematically combat sexual harassment (Gonzalez et al., 2018). All of these events suggest we're living in the middle of a fourth wave.

In attempting to characterize this fourth wave, Feministing blog founder Jessica Valenti said in 2009 that perhaps one of its defining qualities was that it was online (Grady, 2018). As with other 21st-century social movements like the Arab Spring, fourth-wave feminists meet and plan their activism online. The #MeToo movement began as a hashtag on Twitter. Much of the organizing that went into the Women's March took place online as well. For that reason, some have dated the beginning of the fourth wave to 2008, when social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were firmly entrenched in society and popular feminist blogs like Jezebel and Feministing spread across the web. As with other waves of feminism, the fourth wave is diverse and often contradictory. Still, in addition to being digitally driven, fourth-wave feminism is characterized by its queerness, its trans inclusiveness, and its body positivity (Grady, 2018).

If we're currently in a fourth wave of feminism, we're also, at least in the United States, experiencing a backlash. A **backlash** is a strong and adverse reaction by a large number of people to a (usually progressive) political development. The 1980s constituted a backlash against the liberal gains of the '60s and '70s, with conservatives coming to power and seeking to undo many of the gains of that social movement cycle. In fact, the pro-life movement was born out of that backlash.

One signal of the current backlash is the 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*, which many perceive as a major step back in the battle for women's reproductive rights. The decision allowed some states, like Indiana, to pass what are effectively total bans on abortion, while others, like Kansas, voted to keep abortion legal. Many experts fear that the Court's decision to overturn *Roe vs. Wade* may be the first of more rulings that restrict reproductive rights, including access to birth control, as well as social rights like the legalization of gay marriage in the United States. Backlashes demonstrate that social change is always a slow and uneven process, where any gains can always be lost without constant work and vigilance.

## He for She: Men and Feminism

At this point, you might ask yourself, *Where do men fit into all of this?* Are conversations about feminism compatible with conversations about men, and if so, how? You might be concerned, given the considerable amount of time we've just spent talking about feminism and the assumptions many people have about feminism (that feminists are angry or hate men), that this book is going to be all about how much men suck.

Let's start with the first question: Where were men during these various waves of the feminist movement? The answer is complicated. Some men *were* involved in various places and times in women's movements. In the first-wave feminist movement in the United States, men such as abolitionists Frederick Douglass and Henry Ward Beecher (father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) were involved in working for women's suffrage along with the abolition of slavery. Many 19th-century activists saw these issues as deeply connected, although the two issues also sometimes led to divisions within the movement.

The National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) emerged with the second wave of the women's movement in the 1970s and focuses on issues such as child custody and ending men's violence (NOMAS, n.d.). Globally, men and women have often worked side by side in movements for national liberation and establishing democracy. In Kenya, women fought alongside men in the Mau war of 1952 for Kenya's independence from colonial control. In the most recent fourth wave, many men have come forward to claim the feminist label, and the United Nations is actively engaged in a campaign to involve men in the quest for gender equality, a movement labeled He for She. Women involved in social movements often argue that the accomplishment of their goals would benefit both men and women in society, as we will see later. Although this may be true, most people involved in women's movements are often still women.

Are conversations about feminism compatible with conversations about men? The answer to this second question is a definite yes. As mentioned, feminists argue in various forms that a society with more gender equality is a society that's good for everyone, women and men. Although in the United States, the second wave of the feminist movement was often referred to as *women's liberation*, many women felt that the movement would liberate men as well.

What did men need to be liberated from? As we will see throughout this book, although gender as a social system often privileges men, it does not *always* do so, and when it does provide privileges, they often come with a price. Our culture demands that both men and women conform to gender and sexual norms, and men's access to power and privilege is conditional on their conformity to these norms. Part of the goal of feminists is to loosen these restrictions for everyone.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*What are some concrete ways in which feminism could benefit men? How could feminism benefit transgender people, including nonbinary and agender people?*

Feminists have always been subject to accusations of disliking men. But as you should begin to see, feminism is not about positioning men against women in some kind of epic battle for power and control of the universe, although that might make for an interesting video game. As feminism has evolved over time, questions about how to involve men and how feminism matters for men have become increasingly important. As we will see in our discussion of sociological theory that follows, sociologists are especially concerned with studying gender as it applies to men and women, and masculinity is a central topic for gender research. Because gender is a system that is always relational (you can't have a category called "women" without a category called "men"), a comprehensive understanding of gender must examine both men and women. So, no, this book will not be about how much men suck but about how both women and men are part of the social system called gender.

## SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF GENDER

The most important contribution of feminism to sociology as a discipline was to place topics such as gender and sexuality on the agenda of sociologists and to encourage a critical reflection on the place of gender within the larger discipline. This change was signaled in part during the 1970s when academic journals within sociology began publishing issues that focused on gender or featured the works of feminist scholars (Hamilton, 2007). This was the first step toward developing theories that sought to explain gender from a specifically sociological perspective.

### Gender and the Sociological Imagination

So what exactly is this sociological approach to gender? C. Wright Mills famously said that sociology lies at the intersection of history and biography. He wrote this in his essay on the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959/2000), and the sociological imagination is a good place to start a brief overview of what makes up a sociological perspective.

What did Mills mean by the intersection of biography and history? Well, we've already talked some about biography. You come to the topic of gender with an intensely gendered biography. Gender is a part of your biography, and the first contribution sociology makes is to help you act like an archaeologist in the rich and fascinating material of your own life, carefully unearthing the impact of gender.

Understanding your own personal biography may not be easy, but it is more accessible than the second part: history. In his essay on the sociological imagination, Mills (1959/2000) worried about people's ability to understand the forces acting on them historically as individuals. He explained this concern by making a division between private troubles and public issues. **Private troubles** are those problems we face that have to do with ourselves and our immediate surroundings, or what Mills called our "milieux" (p. 11). Private troubles are solvable within ourselves individually or within a limited range of the people around us.

**Public issues** exist beyond the individual or her own immediate milieu, and they are located within the larger structures of our societies—such as social institutions. Public issues are the history part of the intersection between biography and history. Understanding public issues requires taking a difficult step back and looking at the big picture of society, asking ourselves what kind of social forces are working on us that are beyond our control. Like the archaeology described earlier, this can be difficult because it involves seeing the ways in which we are sometimes subject to larger social forces. Understanding that our free will is somewhat limited is not an easy thing for many of us to reconcile; it diminishes the sense that our choices are ours and ours alone to make.

To understand the world around us, we have to understand where our private troubles leave off and public issues begin; this is the core of what Mills was pointing to in his discussion of the sociological imagination. It doesn't help that in societies like the United States, with a strong emphasis on individualism, we are more likely to attribute our problems to private troubles.

This tendency to explain behavior by invoking personal dispositions while ignoring the roles of social structure and context (public issues) is called the **fundamental attribution error** (Aries, 1996). The sociological imagination as outlined by Mills (1959/2000) seeks to correct this tendency, and although feminists use a different language, this is part of their agenda as well. For too long, many of the problems faced by women were perceived as merely private troubles. Feminists demanded that these problems begin to be treated as public issues, or as connected to larger social forces and therefore beyond the control of just one woman or man. From a sociological perspective, using the **sociological imagination** to investigate gender means performing the detailed archaeology of our own biography and learning to identify the larger structural forces at work in our lives surrounding issues of gender.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*One way to think about public issues is to ask how you might think about and experience gender differently if you lived in a different historical period. If you lived 50 years ago, how would your experience of gender be different? How about 100 years ago? What about 500 years ago?*

All the theories we discuss serve as tools to help in building your sociological imagination, or in learning to see the connection between your own life and larger social structures. There are several questions to ask yourself and to think about that will help you as you read through these theories. The first question is this: *How do these theories define gender?* As we discussed in

Chapter 1, there is not complete agreement on exactly how to define gender or sex or on how the two are related to each other. Some theories adhere to the idea of sexual dimorphism—that there are two types of bodies, male and female. Others largely ignore the question of sexual dimorphism or suggest that biological sex is largely unimportant to a consideration of gender. Although theorists usually do not provide an explicit definition of gender, their theories often imply a certain way of understanding what gender is. Think about what the implied definition of gender is in each of these theories.

This first question is related to the second: *Where does the theory locate gender?* Is gender something that exists inside a person, or is it something that's created through interaction? Is gender inside our heads, or is it something deeply embedded in the major institutions of our society? This question has become increasingly important in the sociological study of gender, because theories are often divided into three categories: individual, interactionist, and institutional. Theories using the **individual approach** locate gender inside individuals in some form or another. Some individual theories might see these internal traits as related to sex and therefore biology. Other theories of socialization emphasize that gender becomes internalized over time as we learn gender. From either approach, an individualist theory understands gender as something located inside the individual, and its influence is realized from the inside out through our individual actions and behaviors.

**Interactionist approaches** locate gender metaphorically in the space between people. Rather than something that resides inside a person, gender is something that is created primarily in the interaction between people. In many interactionist theories, gender therefore does not exist as an internal trait or disposition but only as a phenomenon created in our interactions with other people.

Finally, **institutional approaches** draw attention to the way in which large-scale organizations and institutions in society help to create and reinforce gender. Like radical feminism, these theories emphasize the way in which gender is woven into all the structures of society. When we are plugged into those institutions and structures, the slots we fill are already gendered. Gender is created by the working of these social structures.

The third question to think about for these theories and any theory of gender is the following: *How does the theory explain the connection between gender and inequality?* Does the theory address issues of inequality, and what is its explanation for why this inequality exists? How is the explanation of inequality rooted in the way the theory defines and locates gender? This question asks us to think about the real-world implications of different theoretical approaches. When you thoroughly explore the implications of the theory, does it still make sense, and does the theory still work? Can you think of a situation in which the theory just doesn't seem to work? Exploring a theory's implications also means thinking through its practical applications.

This is especially relevant for how the theory explains gender inequality. If you follow the assumptions of the theory, what would be the most important step in reducing gender inequality? For example, we saw that radical feminism defines gender as deeply embedded in the workings of society. Given this way of thinking about gender, the implication of radical feminism for practical action is that you must make radical transformations to society to reduce gender inequality. As you read through these theories, think about what practical action they imply.

Table 2.1 demonstrates these three key questions to ask.

| TABLE 2.1 ■ Questions to Ask About Gender Theories |
| --- |
| How does this theory define gender? |
| Where does this theory locate gender—inside the individual, within interactions, or as embedded in institutions? |
| How does this theory explain the connection between gender and inequality? |

## SEX ROLES

Sex role theory is our first example of an individual approach to gender. We've already discussed the important distinctions between the terms *gender* and *sex*, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that early works exploring the role of gender in sociology most commonly used the term *sex roles*. The idea of a sex role begins with the idea of a social role more generally. A **social role** is a set of expectations that are attached to a particular status or position in society. Statuses can be general, like man or woman, white or Black, and gay or straight. Or they can be more specific, such as professor of sociology, sophomore biology major, president of the science fiction club, or father of three children.

Different expectations go along with these different statuses. For example, we might expect a first-year sociology major to come to class hungover, but we would not expect that of the professor of sociology; it wouldn't be unusual for the president of the science fiction and fantasy club to spend 30 hours a week playing Dungeons & Dragons, but we probably wouldn't expect that from a father and husband with a full-time job (unless maybe he was playing with his children).

A **sex role**, then, is the set of expectations attached to your particular sex category. What are the expectations that people in society have for you based on your status as a woman or a man? An easy way to uncover these expectations is to think about what kinds of behaviors you might get in trouble for engaging in or thoughts that might seem strange to have as a man or woman in your society. For example, in American society, it might be strange to see an adult man cry, but in popular Bollywood movies produced in India, it's an expectation that the male heroes cry. The best male actors are those best at shedding some tears. Social roles vary by society, but most cultures impose some set of expectations on individuals based on their assignment to a sex category. Violations of a role are a good way to tease out the expectations that go along with that particular role.

Sex role theory emerged from within the larger paradigm of the structural-functionalist approach in sociology, and sociologists such as Talcott Parsons explained these differences in terms of instrumental versus expressive roles (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Men were taught in childhood and throughout their lives to be **instrumental**, or goal and task oriented, whereas women were taught to be **expressive**, or oriented toward interactions with other people.

### THINK ABOUT IT

*Make a list of some of the expectations that go along with being a man or a woman in your society. Do you follow all these expectations? What are the results if or when you don't follow some of the expectations?*

This particular division of labor into instrumental and expressive activities was considered functional for society, so women who worked outside the home or men who wanted to stay home and take care of their children created dysfunction for society. The concept of sex roles, rather than challenging the predominant gender ideology of the time, actually reinforced it.

You can see how this theory could be problematic for sociologists and feminists committed to ending or lessening gender inequality. During the period when sociologists were dealing with the concept of sex roles, Betty Friedan (1963) wrote her famous book, *The Feminine Mystique*, and identified what she called "the problem with no name." That problem was the lack of fulfillment experienced by many women who did not work for pay outside the home. The 1950s in America witnessed a period when many women (though mostly white, straight, middle-class women) were encouraged to become homemakers, a relatively new and rare phenomenon in the long history of gender. How could sex role theory help create a justification for these women moving outside the home and back into the workplace, a goal of many feminists? A theory that supported these sex roles as good for the whole of society seemed unlikely to serve that purpose.

The concept of sex roles as it was initially articulated was problematic, but the use of social roles to explore how gender works remains a common way of understanding this aspect of society. For example, research on the gender of love uses the concept of instrumental and expressive types of intimacy. Although the particular terminology of sex roles is less popular in today's study of gender, the idea of gender as a social role is an important contribution, one that has been built on by subsequent theorists.

## INTERACTIONIST THEORIES

The next theory moves to the level of interaction as the important site for the study of gender. This means that doing gender argues for the importance of interaction to our understanding of gender and sees gender as something produced in groups among individuals rather than as residing within an individual.

### Sex Categorization

The process of sex categorization is an important interactionist approach, so we need to understand this concept first. **Sex categorization** is the way we use cues of culturally presumed appearance and behavior to represent physical gender differences that we generally cannot see (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Sex categorization is similar to gender attribution, discussed in Chapter 1. Compared to many species, humans have less dramatic visible gender markers. In many bird species, males and females are different colors, and many other animal species have considerable size differences between the sexes. It's fairly easy to tell the difference between a male and a female robin, for example, but not as easy to tell the differences between a woman and a man.

As humans, we rely mainly on cultural cues like clothing, hair length, movement, gestures, and conversation to differentiate men from women because most of us don't walk around naked or with our distinguishing body parts exposed to plain view. As discussed in Chapter 1, we rely on cultural genitalia. We engage in categorization for all kinds of statuses, like age, race, class

background, and sexual orientation. But research shows that we engage in *sex* categorization automatically and, most of the time, unconsciously (Brewer & Lui, 1989; Stangor et al., 1992).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 2.1

### RAISING GENDER-NEUTRAL CHILDREN

Incorrectly categorizing someone's sex can be upsetting—to the person doing the categorizing as well as to the person being categorized. Infants don't have any of the physical cues we generally use to sex-categorize adults, and this is why some parents make sure to provide their babies with clear gender markers. How many baby girls have you seen with pink bows fixed to their hairless heads? Dressing your newborn in clearly feminine or masculine clothing prevents that awkward moment when you ask about someone's little girl only to find out he's really a baby boy. But some parents intentionally prevent people from sex-categorizing their children by refusing to reveal the sex of their child. Couples in Sweden, England, and Canada have all stirred controversy by keeping the sex of their child a secret from anyone outside the family, sometimes even from siblings. One couple kept their son Sasha's sex a secret until he was 5, revealing his sex only when he started primary school (Wilkes, 2012). Like many other parents who have made this decision, Sasha's parents were motivated by a desire to protect their child from the stereotyping that gender brings. But in the media, these parents face harsh criticism suggesting that their decisions to raise gender-neutral children are potentially damaging. Kathy Witterick, who has not disclosed the gender of her child, Storm, explained, "The discussion that emerges [about raising gender-neutral children] not only 'outs' people (in their rush to judge, they demonstrate the prevailing views), but also has the effect of helping people examine whether they truly do believe the status quo to be the best that we can do. Is this the best that we can do to grow healthy, happy, kind, well adjusted children?" (Gillies, 2011, para. 15). Because the phenomenon of raising gender-neutral children is relatively new, there's no evidence on the long-term effects. Is imposing sex categorization on children in their best interests? Could a widespread movement to raise gender-neutral children have an effect on reducing gender inequality?

## Doing Gender

Doing gender, a theory developed first by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), was one of the first theories to strongly emphasize interaction as the site for the study of gender, a shift that these theorists argue makes interactionist theories more inherently sociological. From a doing-gender perspective, gender is a performance, and we're all constantly on stage.

The perspective of doing gender is informed by a particular approach in sociology called **ethnomethodology**, or the study of folk ways. Ethnomethodologists are interested in uncovering the taken-for-granted rules that govern our social life but lie largely unexamined most of the time. They're interested in how aspects of our social lives that seem objective, real, and universal are actually created in specific situations and contexts (Zimmerman, 1978). A famous example of how early ethnomethodologists engaged in this project is the use of breaching experiments.

In breaching experiments, ethnomethodologists send students out to create a purposeful **breach** in social life, or a disruption that requires some kind of explanation because it does not fit into the particular cultural story being told. In one breaching experiment, students responded to the statement "How are you?" with a detailed description of their current state of being. For example, they might say, "Well, I'm getting over a cold, so my nose is a bit stuffed up, and I had a fight with my best friend, so I'm worried about that. I feel like I did a good job on my biology exam, so at the moment, I guess I'm OK."

As with many breaching experiments, people responded with confusion, discomfort, and sometimes annoyance or anger. Answering the question "How are you?" in this way breaks with a basic kind of trust we have in our fellow interactants that they are aware of and will follow the rules for smooth and successful interaction. In this case, the rule that's being broken is that when someone asks "How are you?" it is generally not appropriate to give an actual answer to the question. "How are you?" should be treated as a greeting rather than a question.

As applied to gender, an ethnomethodological perspective is interested in uncovering the assumptions concealed in the way we think about and live gender. One particularly influential ethnomethodologist, Harold Garfinkel (1967), began the process of applying ethnomethodology to gender when he became interested in the case of a transgender woman named Agnes (a pseudonym Garfinkel used to protect the real identity of Agnes). Agnes was assigned male at birth (AMAB) but, at the age of 17, began her transition to a woman and eventually underwent gender-confirming surgery (also called sex-reassignment surgery). Garfinkel, and later West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009), used Agnes as a case to begin an examination of how gender works.

Why would you pick a transgender person as a starting place for examining gender? For the doing-gender perspective, it has to do with the way Agnes as a case helps us understand the differences between sex category and gender.

We've already discussed conflicting definitions of sex in Chapter 1. The perspective of doing gender follows a strong social constructionist approach. This means that from a doing-gender perspective, sex category is something produced socially rather than objectively as real biological or genetic differences between women and men. Agnes's desire for gender-confirming surgery to correct her perception that her penis was a "mistake" in need of remedy is itself an act that reaffirms that sex is socially produced. Despite having a penis (an indicator of being male and a man), Agnes felt like a woman. Her **gender identity**, or her internal sense of her gender, was feminine.

From a doing-gender perspective, gender assignment, or putting someone into one or the other sex category, usually at birth, is considered by society to be merely a case of discovering the "facts of the matter" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). These facts are based on genitalia, chromosome type, and perhaps the presence or absence of various hormones, and we assume these will all line up in the appropriate ways (presence of a penis lines up with XY chromosomes, which lines up with the presence of appropriate amounts of testosterone at puberty).

As we discussed in Chapter 1, this is not necessarily true, as the case of intersex individuals demonstrates, and the criteria for gender assignment can vary across time and cultures (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Nonetheless, many of us in Anglo-European society still believe in the existence of two sexes and in our ability to see a world that consists of two sexes, even though the indicators of sex (genitalia, chromosomes, and hormones) are generally hidden from us.

But what about Agnes, who was assigned male at birth but was a woman in her gender identity? How does someone learn to perform a gender different from the one they were born into? Answering this question leads us to the important connection between sex categorization and *the accomplishment of gender*. Being categorized as a woman does not mean everything you do is automatically feminine. If you stop for a minute, you can probably think of many women who do not act in feminine ways and many men who do not act in masculine ways. But acting "unfeminine" does not also make you "un-female." This means the relationship between sex categorization and gender is more complicated. What Agnes needed was some configuration of behavior that would lead people to see her as femininely gendered and, therefore, to assume that she was also a woman (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). How might Agnes learn to act feminine?

One potential source would be various women's magazines or books on etiquette. These manuals lay out specific ground rules for what makes feminine or, sometimes more specifically, ladylike behavior. Agnes could simply follow these rules, but from the doing-gender perspective, there are problems with this solution. Strictly following some set of rules for feminine behavior might get Agnes into trouble because the enactment of gender is deeply situational and contextual. For example, one particular middle-class American norm is that women are expected to smile more, often including smiling at people they do not know. A guide to proper American feminine behavior might tell Agnes to smile often to be identifiable as a woman.

But the rule would have to be more specific and contextual than that. It might be OK for Agnes to smile at a grocery clerk or waiter, but should she also smile at everyone in the women's restroom? Should she smile at strangers on a busy city street? If Agnes is with her boyfriend, should she smile at other men? What if she's alone on a dark street in the middle of the night?

In addition, if Agnes were trying to achieve social femaleness in many cultures outside the United States, smiling at strange people would not be considered a particularly feminine behavior, and it could get her into trouble. Even in some European countries, a woman who makes eye contact with a strange man, let alone smiles at him, is interpreted as making a pass. The rules about smiling and gender quickly become infinitely complex and too complicated to be codified into any simple set of rules.

The doing-gender perspective argues that rather than a set of rules, what someone like Agnes needs is to make sure her actions are *accountable* as feminine. Accountability is an important concept from ethnomethodology, and it highlights the importance of the interactional nature of gender. **Accounts** are the descriptions we engage in as social actors to explain to each other the state of affairs, or what we think is going on (Heritage, 1987). They are important because they serve a variety of purposes in interaction; they can help us identify, categorize, explain, or just draw attention to some activity or situation and therefore provide us with some kind of framework for understanding it (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). Accounts help us to make sense of the events and interactions that go on around us.

Accountability, then, has an inherently social and interactional quality; it's determined by how people react to each other. What does all that mean? When you tell a story about a chicken crossing the road or about a priest, a rabbi, and an imam, it's really only a joke if it's *accountable* as a joke—or if the people to whom you're telling the story acknowledge it as a joke. Laughing

at the story is one kind of account, in that when you laugh, you're identifying the story as a joke. But even if no one laughs, your audience can still provide an account that acknowledges your story as a joke. They might roll their eyes or shake their heads or groan, but all of those reactions acknowledge that the story you told was, in fact, a joke . . . just not a very good one.

Your story is not accountable as a joke if someone stares at you blankly or asks what a story about a chicken has to do with anything. Ethnomethodologists argue that in our interactions, we work to make our actions accountable—even though this always depends on the reaction of others. When we tell a joke, even if it's bad, we'd like it to at least be considered a joke by our audience. **Accountability** means that we gear our actions with attention to our specific circumstances so that others will recognize our actions for what they are (Heritage, 1987); we want our joke to be understood as a joke, and we're likely to be embarrassed and chagrined if it is not.

How does that apply to our particular focus—gender? The doing-gender perspective argues that gender is all about rendering your actions accountable as gendered. Sex category is omnirelevant, which is to say that it matters in all situations, all the time. If sex category matters in every situation, then every activity you engage in can be held accountable as a performance of gender, or as being a man or a woman.

Using our example of the joke, this highlights two important aspects of the doing-gender perspective. The first is that you don't have to conform to normative ideas of gender in order for your performance to be perceived as accountable. Even a bad joke is still a joke as long as it's considered by your audience to be accountable as a joke. Even behavior that doesn't conform to gender norms can be viewed as gendered if your fellow interactants judge it accountable as a performance of gender. This is important because it explains why people can engage in behavior inconsistent with their gender while still being perceived as belonging to their particular sex category. For many people, crying is considered unmanly, but a man who starts crying is generally not suddenly categorized as a female. Even with crying, his overall set of behaviors is probably still considered accountable as male.

The second important aspect of doing gender that's demonstrated here is that gender is inherently interactional. You can gear your actions to make them accountable, but in the end, accountability is a product of social interaction. Try as you may to tell something that you consider a joke, if no one else considers it as such, it's not really a joke. In the same way, regardless of whether you are or are not trying to portray your actions as gendered, if they are accountable as such, they are in fact an example of doing gender. Gender, from this perspective, is defined not just as your own performance but rather as that performance combined with its accountability.

Where is gender located? It's in the intersection between what you do and whether others consider those actions to be accountable as gender. Agnes's solution is not to follow some guidebook or rules for how to be a woman; rather, she needs to become practiced at producing a set of behaviors that are held as accountable for a woman in her particular context and culture.

This unique way of thinking about gender is hard to grasp because gender becomes more than the sum of how we think or feel (dispositions or traits) or even what we do (behaviors). Theorists within the doing-gender perspective argue that by moving the location of gender outside individuals and into the space of interaction, the result is a uniquely sociological approach to understanding gender: Gender becomes deeply social in nature.

In addition, it's important to be able to understand gender in this way because it helps explain the powerfully strong belief most people in society have in the notion of sex as something objectively real. When we produce gender daily in routine, recurring ways, we also produce the notion that our actions and perceptions of those actions reflect our masculine and feminine natures (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009).

For example, we tend to believe that men, because of their sex category, don't know anything about menstruation. So women don't talk about menstruation with or around men. Because women rarely talk about menstruation to men, not surprisingly, men end up not knowing much about menstruation. In this sense, the doing-gender perspective argues that gender works like a magic act. Our accomplishment of gender confirms our notion that we're merely acting out the "natural" division of human beings into two sexes, and it creates the illusion that such a thing exists. It's a magic act in the sense that this performance creates a belief in something that is really all smoke and mirrors: the existence of something called sex.

How does the doing-gender perspective explain the existence of gender inequality? To say that gender is a performance for which we are accountable does not automatically imply anything about inequality between men and women. Theorists working from this perspective explain inequality through the concept of allocation (West & Fenstermaker, 1993). **Allocation** is simply the way decisions get made about who does what, who gets what and who does not, who gets to make plans, and who gets to give orders or take them (West & Fenstermaker, 1993). The doing-gender perspective argues that the accountability of gender is more likely to be called into question when issues of allocation are involved.

Allocation can become important in something as simple as a routine conversation, in decisions about who does housework and childcare in a family, and in the different expectations for men and women in the workplace. The doing-gender perspective demonstrates allocation in simple conversations between white, middle-class men and women, where the particular kind of work to be allocated is making topical transitions when one topic runs out of steam in a conversation.

Research on conversations has shown that unilateral topic changes—topic changes initiated by one person instead of collaboratively by conversation partners—are always initiated by men. In this instance, the resource being allocated is control over what two people will talk about in a conversation. Men accomplish gender in conversation by changing the topic, and this seems to be especially true when women move the conversation toward topics not necessarily considered consistent with ideas of masculinity (West & Garcia, 1988). In this small way, men are producing an accountable performance of masculinity. Later, we'll read about how the division of household labor among couples can also serve as a resource for doing gender, as can the battle over who gets to hold and use the remote control in families. In all these examples, allocation of certain duties and responsibilities explains how gender inequality is accomplished from a doing-gender perspective.

## Undoing or Redoing Gender?

There's little doubt that doing gender as a theoretical perspective has become the dominant paradigm for the sociological study of gender (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). The seminal article by West and Zimmerman has been cited 634 times since it was first published, 60 times in 2005

alone (Deutsch, 2007). The article is reprinted in countless gender textbooks and read by untold numbers of students every year. Like all good theories, doing gender continues to be revised and adapted. Most recently, sociologists have focused on two main questions in regard to this theory.

*First*, researchers have asked whether doing gender is truly omnirelevant or whether we do gender equally in every situation. Some researchers suggest we should explore whether gender is always being performed (Deutsch, 2007). For example, sex categorization may take place in every interaction, but it's unclear whether it's equally important to all interactions. Some studies suggest that gender stereotypes are less important in situations in which we're cognitively busy (distracted by something else), when we have self-interested motives, and when we're exposed to counterstereotypical thoughts and images (Deutsch, 2007). So are there situations in which we do gender a little less?

Assuming the answer to this first question is yes, this leads to the *second question*—is it possible to undo gender? Some have read doing-gender theory to say that individual strategies in any given interaction cannot challenge a system of discrimination (Deutsch, 2007). Accountability may shift sometimes in ways that lead to less oppressive ways of doing gender, but the idea of accountability itself never goes away (West & Zimmerman, 2009). That is, we can redo gender but never undo gender.

Francine M. Deutsch (2007) has suggested that it *is* possible to undo gender and that we should alter the doing-gender framework to accommodate that possibility. Doing gender should be used to describe social interactions that do reproduce gender differences, while undoing gender would be employed for situations that reduce gender difference. For example, Catherine Connell (2010) demonstrates that trans people in the workplace do gender, undo gender, and redo gender as they negotiate the complicated relationship between sex, gender, and sex category.

## INSTITUTIONAL OR STRUCTURAL APPROACHES

The next two theories we discuss locate gender at the level of institutions or in the social structure of society. If you think about our exploration of theory as a large-zoom camera, we started with an extreme close-up of individuals and what goes on inside their heads. Then we zoomed out a bit to the level of groups and interaction. In this final zoom, we move our lens far out to encompass large organizations and the way societies as a whole fit together.

### Gendered Organizations

As Joan Acker (1990) pointed out, an institutional analysis of gender requires seeing through what appear to be the gender-neutral practices of organizations to uncover their powerfully gendered nature. This approach, sometimes called *macrostructural*, shifts the focus from individuals or interaction to social aggregates (Dunn et al., 1993). **Social aggregates** are *composed* of individuals, but they become more than the sum of the individuals within them.

A macrostructural approach to gender assumes that gender is more than individual traits or interaction between those individuals; as a part of social aggregates, gender takes on a life of its own. Within the gendered-organizations approach, this means that organizations can create gendered individuals and shape gendered interactions, but gender is working from the top down (from organizations down to the level of individuals and interactions) rather than from the bottom up (from individuals or interactions to organizations).

What exactly does it mean to call an organization gendered? A **gendered organization** is one in which "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker, 1990, p. 146). This is another way of saying that the normal functioning of the organization is based on gender and has important gendered consequences. From this perspective, gender is not simply something that you add into your basic understanding of how an organization works; because everything about the organization is gendered, there are no gender-neutral processes in this type of organization. Instead, gender is a basic and integral part of how the organization functions.

According to Acker (1990), organizations produce gender through five interrelated processes. *First*, gendered organizations create divisions along gender lines, whether in physical location, power, or behaviors. For example, your average gym in the United States has separate locker rooms for women and men, as well as areas that are generally considered more or less masculine (the free-weight room versus the aerobics room). *Second*, gendered organizations construct symbols or images that can support or oppose those divisions. There may be inspirational posters in the gym that portray slim women and bulked-up, muscular men, reinforcing the sense that women are at the gym to become thin while men are there to become larger. *Third*, gendered organizations produce types of interaction that reinforce these divisions and inequality. In the gendered space of the free-weight room, men may interact in very different ways than the women in the aerobics rooms or using cardio equipment. The lone woman wandering around in the free-weight room may be made to feel out of place or be offered assistance by gym workers, just as the lone man taking an aerobics class may be expected to be a little less capable in that area. In one gym I belonged to, there was a sauna in the men's locker room but not in the women's, representing an inequality of resources.

Gendered organizations also have an impact on individual identity, the *fourth* important process. The woman who repeatedly finds herself surrounded by men in the free-weight room may feel subtle pressure to stop lifting weights, and this pressure may change her own idea of appropriate exercise for women. She may internalize these messages in a way that makes her feel more positive about a slim body rather than a muscular body. Note, for both the third and fourth processes—interaction and individual identity—gendered organizations affect these processes from the top down, with the organization itself impacting your internal sense of gender as well as how you interact.

The *fifth* and final process is the way in which gender helps to both create and reinforce social structures. Acker (1990) argued that this happens through **organizational logic**, or the assumptions and practices that underlie an organization. If gyms as organizations are structured in ways that assume basic gender differences, then they are building gender into the organizational structure. To get at the organizational logic of a gym, you might ask why the gym is divided into different areas in the first place. Why do most gyms separate the free weights from the weight machines or from the treadmills, bikes, and stair-climbing machines? Is there an underlying gender logic that separates the uses of the gym based on the assumed gender of the typical user (i.e., free weights are for men and StairMasters are for women)? Table 2.2 demonstrates these five processes of gendered organizations.

| TABLE 2.2 ■ Five Processes of Gendered Organizations With Examples From Sports | |
|---|---|
| **1.** Create divisions along gender lines | Almost all sports are segregated by gender, with women playing against women and men playing against men. Many sports are totally different for women or men, like softball or lacrosse, which has very different rules for women and men. |
| **2.** Construct symbols or images that can support or oppose those divisions | Many sports teams have feminized mascots. The men's team may be the Cubs, and the women's team are the Lady Cubs or Cubettes. |
| **3.** Produce types of interactions that reinforce these divisions and inequality | When women and men do play together (in recreational leagues), specific rules dictate "fair" competition by controlling the gender mix of players (for example, on a co-ed basketball team, there must be at least two women on the court at all times). |
| **4.** Have an impact on individual identity | Research has shown that men on certain types of sports teams, like American football, are more likely to engage in toxic masculinity. When these same boys participate in more gender-egalitarian activities, like cheerleading, their ideas about gender change. |
| **5.** Help create and reinforce social structure through organizational logic | It is taken for granted that sports must be gender segregated, to the extent that suggestions that sports be integrated by gender are met with derision or hostility. Organizational logic dictates that gender segregation is the only way to play sports. |

## THINK ABOUT IT

*What aspects of your own life might contribute to the formation of homophilous networks? For example, how diverse are the places where you grew up or where you live now? What about the places where you go to school or work?*

## INTEGRATIVE APPROACHES

Separating theories based on where they locate gender—at the level of individuals, interactions, or institutions—is a useful exercise for teasing out how gender works at the theoretical level. In the real world, gender functions on all these levels simultaneously.

To show how this works, let's pick a specific example of a gendered phenomenon. You may have seen stories about two gendered phenomena—upspeak, or the tendency to raise your voice

at the end of a sentence, and vocal fry, defined as the tendency to draw out the ends of words or sentences in a low, creaky voice (Grosse et al., 2015). These verbal patterns have been associated with young women, who are criticized for sounding hesitant or annoying. While some question whether vocal fry and upspeak are really a "feminine" speech pattern, others suggest that young women who use these speech patterns are undermining themselves and their abilities (Riley, 2015; Wolf, 2015). What would an integrative approach to this phenomenon look like?

From the individual perspective, we might say that the tendency for young women to use vocal fry and upspeak is part of the social role associated with the status of being a woman in American society. Women learn through the process of gender socialization that making every sentence sound like a question is an important way for women to demonstrate passivity; upspeak makes even the strongest statements contingent rather than assertive claims to truth. This tendency is considered an internal trait.

But how do vocal fry and upspeak *become* internalized? There, we might turn to gendered organizations and their attention to the ways in which being part of a social aggregate can create gendered interactions and gendered identities. Are there certain groups girls are part of that encourage vocal fry? For girls who aren't in these groups, are they less likely to adapt these speech patterns?

This would be a good explanation of how this works at the institutional or structural level. But exactly how does that process happen? How do these day-to-day interactions produce these gendered behaviors? An interactional theory might be best suited to answering these particular questions. According to the doing-gender perspective, a man doesn't use vocal fry because to do so would not be accountable as masculine within the context of that interaction. The repeated need to produce actions that are accountable as gender then reinforces the original behavior, making the need to use vocal fry feel more like an internal trait, and so on. This example demonstrates how we can begin to perceive these different levels at which gender operates as interconnected and complementary rather than as contradictory and incompatible.

Integrative approaches are useful in that they help us see how gender can operate at many different levels in any given situation. Intersectional theory and hegemonic masculinity are two examples of integrative theories.

## Intersectional Theory

Black Lives Matter, as a hashtag and a social movement, seeks to bring attention to systematic violence against African Americans (Garza, 2014). The movement started in the wake of the murder of Trayvon Martin, who was shot by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in Florida. Martin's death was followed by a similar case in Ferguson, Missouri, when Mike Brown, a young Black man, was also shot and killed by police. Neither man was armed or committing a crime at the time of his murder. Both of these cases involved young Black men, and certainly most media attention focused on violence against this specific group.

But the Black Lives Matter movement from the beginning was an intersectional movement. You might be surprised to learn that the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement are three Black women who self-identify as queer—Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors, and Alicia Garza (Tillet, 2015). As the case of Breonna Taylor brought to national attention, Black women

are also victims of police violence; a short list includes Sandra Bland in 2015 and Reika Boyd in 2012 (Tillet, 2015). Trans men and trans women of color are also victimized by the police. About 80% of the murders of transgender people in 2018 were committed against trans women of color. By July 2019, more than 10 trans women of color had been murdered, victims of **transmisogynoir**, or the specific hatred of transgender women of color who sit at the intersection of three interlocking systems of oppression—sexism, cissexism, and racism (Sonoma, 2019). Despite the ways the founders of this movement sought to address violence against African Americans in all its forms, the roles of women and the LGBTQ community were often pushed to the side. This tendency points to the continuing importance and relevance of an intersectional approach to our study of gender and social life in general.

Intersectionality as an approach is nothing new. As we've already discussed, it goes back to the very beginnings of the global women's movements. Intersectionality as a theory and a movement starts with the tendency of feminists and gender theorists to focus on gender to the exclusion of any other types of identities. Here's something you may or may not have noticed about the theories we've discussed. They all separate gender from any of the other many identities and statuses we occupy. Gender is considered separately from statuses such as race, ethnicity, age, class, nationality, and sexuality.

These theories, as I have described them, assume that gender is something you can pluck out of the very complicated, messy stuff that is our lives to examine in a pristine state. Does gender really work that way? Can you ever simply be a "man" in interaction, or are you always also raced, classed, and sexualized? These questions have been asked over time by women of color and working-class women like Sojourner Truth, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, Rosalinda Mendez Gonzalez, and Maxine Baca Zinn, to name just a few. Intersectionality as an approach argues that it's impossible and undesirable to separate out all the different identities we occupy in order to examine gender alone.

But how do we go about embracing the complexity of our lived experience of gender? In our attempts to incorporate intersectionality, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argued that two basic problems must be overcome. The *first problem* is an underlying belief in dichotomies or oppositions. You can be either Black *or* white, man *or* woman, straight *or* gay, but you cannot be *both* at the same time, and these things exist as opposites of each other. This oppositional, either/or thinking is especially problematic when you add the ideas of oppressed or oppressor and privileged or not privileged. A Latinx man in the United States is in a position of privilege relative to his gender, but he may be oppressed relative to his ethnicity; his status makes him both oppressed and oppressor, and this violates the underlying assumption of either/or thinking—that you are either in one category or the other.

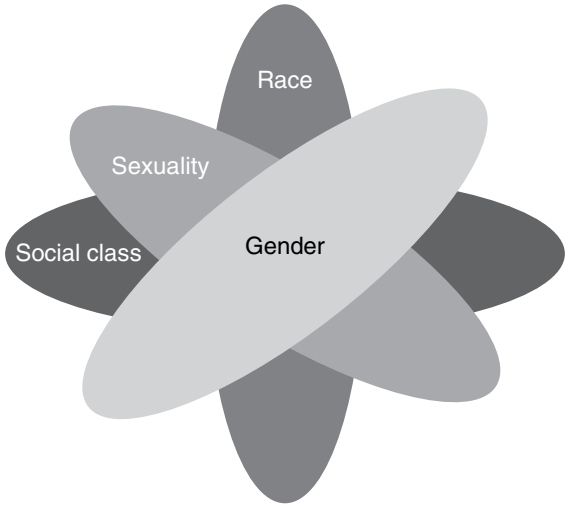
The *second problem* that stands in the way of thinking intersectionally is the idea that these dichotomous differences can be put into some meaningful system of ranking (Collins & Andersen, 1993). The ranking of men as superior to women, whites as superior to Asians, and heterosexuals as superior to homosexuals assumes some quantitative component to the categories, because this ranking implies some kind of logical, numerical order. If you can rank men above women and whites above Asians, then you must also be able to create some ranking of all these identities.

But as Collins (1990) pointed out, this assumption breaks down once you begin to think about the real people who occupy these identities. Collins is often asked as a Black woman whether she is more oppressed by her gender or her race, and she says that what the question essentially asks her to do is "divide myself into little boxes and rank my various statuses" (Collins & Andersen, 1993, p. 71). Her actual experience of oppression is not the *either/or* described by dichotomous, oppositional thinking but the *both/and* that exists when you cannot, as she said, conveniently divide yourself up into neat little boxes of identity.

One model for thinking about intersecting identities that seeks to overcome the problems of these two premises uses the metaphor of interlocking identities. This perspective is also sometimes called **multiple consciousness**, which describes a way of thinking that develops from a person's position at the center of "intersecting and mutually reliant systems of oppression" (Ward, 2004, p. 83). This perspective seeks to correct for the tendency to perceive one system of domination as more important or fundamental than another. Gender, race, class, and sexual orientation all need to be recognized as distinct social structures that can be experienced by individuals simultaneously. Multiple consciousness does not ask us to divide ourselves up into neat little boxes of gender, race, class, and sexuality; it acknowledges that these identities interact dynamically in any given situation.

The idea of multiple consciousness in the various forms in which it has been articulated has four basic assumptions. The *first* is that identities such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation work as social structures in what theorists call a matrix of domination. The **matrix of domination** (see Figure 2.1) means that the social structures of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation work with and through each other so that any individual experiences each of these categories differently depending on his or her unique social location (Zinn & Dill, 1996).

**FIGURE 2.1 ■ Matrix of Domination**




*Source*: Adapted from: Zinn, M. B., and Dill, B.T. (1996). Theorizing difference from multiracial feminism. *Feminist Studies, 22*(2), 321–331.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Make a list of all the identities you occupy that are privileged identities and all the identities you occupy that are not privileged identities. Does your experience of these contradictions feel like the either/or option or the both/and option? How do these various identities interact in your daily life?*

This is another way of saying that it is impossible to ever completely separate gender from the other identities we occupy and the unique ways in which those identities intersect. In addition, the matrix of domination assumes that gender needs the social structures of race, class, and sexual orientation to work, just as race as a social structure needs gender, class, and sexual orientation. For example, the subordination of lower classes works through the social structure of gender. The idea of the housewife had important gender implications, but it was also a tool used to enforce class and racial differences, as poor women and women of color were rarely able to choose not to work outside the home and be housewives in the way upper-class, white women were. Thus, the ideal of the housewife had gender, class, and racial implications, and leaving out any of these social structures results in an incomplete understanding of how and why the ideal of the housewife developed in Anglo-European society.

The *second* basic assumption of multiple consciousness is that these social structures are interlocking and simultaneous. This is a rejection of the idea of statuses as additive or multiplicative in favor of a model of interlocking circles of experience. At any given moment, a person can be within the circles of race, gender, and sexual orientation and experiencing all of them at the same time. The model is more dynamic in that we can imagine how the movement of one ring might affect the other (West & Fenstermaker, 1995).

The *third* basic assumption of this theory is that because of the interlocking and simultaneous nature of categories of difference, they can produce both oppression and privilege. Because of the complex ways in which these identities interact with each other, it is possible to be both/and: oppressed and privileged.

The *fourth* assumption of multiple consciousness is that using an intersectional approach allows for a fuller examination of how identities like race, class, gender, and sexual orientation work themselves out in the lived experiences of real people. Autobiographies and memoirs have sometimes provided the best accounts of the complex interplay of these identities because they focus on lived experiences. Multiple-consciousness theorists argue that this approach is especially helpful in highlighting the complexity of these relationships and dynamics.

Over 30 years after Kimberlé Crenshaw's original formulation of intersectionality in the context of Black women in the legal system, theorists are still exploring exactly what it means to use an intersectional approach. As an analytic framework, intersectionality is a way of thinking about sameness and difference and its relation to power (Cho et al., 2013; McCall, 2005). An intersectional approach, then, conceives of "categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). Especially important is the emphasis on how power permeates these categories.

## Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity as a theory is part of a more recent trend in sociology and social science to "study up." **Studying up** means examining social categories that exist in a privileged or advantaged position. For a long time in sociology, the study of gender meant the study of women. The study of race and ethnicity was reduced to the study of nonwhite people. The study of sexuality focused on those who didn't conform to our heteronormative ideas—gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or polysexual people. When we study up, we shift our focus to men and masculinity, to the construction of whiteness as a social category, and to unpacking assumptions about heterosexuality as normal and natural. We focus our attention on the top of the hierarchy instead of the bottom. The move to study up comes from the realization that these categories of oppression and privilege work together, so if we want to understand femininity, we have to understand masculinity as well.

Enter Raewyn Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. **Hegemonic masculinity** is a concept that comes from the exploration of how our dominant ideas about what it means to be a man influence the behaviors of actual men in any given society. According to Connell's theory, there is no one male role, as might be assumed in sex role theory, but a variety of masculinities that interact with each other in hierarchical and contested ways. Men enact different versions of this masculinity depending on where they are located in social hierarchies of power. Hegemonic masculinity is the type of gender practice that, in any given space and time, exists at the top of those hierarchies.

It's important in Connell's formulation to keep in mind that there is not one dominant way of being masculine but only masculinities—of which hegemonic masculinity is but one example. In addition, the particular version of masculinity that is hegemonic changes across times, cultures, and subcultures. The masculinity that is considered hegemonic for preschool kids is not what's hegemonic for grown men, for American men 50 years ago, for Mexican men, or even for the boys at another preschool down the road. Hegemonic masculinities are historically created and contingent. But once a particular version of masculinity becomes hegemonic, it can be used to patrol the behaviors of men or boys within that particular setting.

In any given setting, few men conform to all the exact characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. As Erving Goffman (1963) noted long before the development of this theory, the standards men are held to are so high as to be mostly unreachable:

> In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports. (p. 128)

Given the impossibility for most men of perfectly conforming to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, many men engage in **complicit masculinity**. These men receive the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In other words, they're still able to cash in on their **patriarchal dividend**, or the advantage to men as a group for maintaining the unequal gender order, even if they don't perfectly conform to hegemonic masculinity (R. W. Connell & Pearse, 2015).

Other men are not so lucky. Within Connell's formulation, gay men occupy a status of **subordinated masculinity** relative to other groups of men. This means that gay men are at the bottom of the gender hierarchy that exists among men. Homosexuality becomes a repository for all that is expelled from hegemonic masculinity—mostly anything that might be associated with femininity. This group might also include some heterosexual men and boys who are expelled from hegemonic masculinity for being wimps, nerds, sissies, yellowbellies, pushovers, mother's boys, and any other identities that symbolically blur with femininity (R. W. Connell, 2005).

While complicit and subordinated masculinities are internal to the gender order, marginalized masculinity acknowledges the interplay of gender with other categories such as social class or race. **Marginalized masculinity** refers to the relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups (R. W. Connell, 2005). For example, among white supremacists, constructions of Black masculinity as characterized by violence or hypersexuality are crucial to the construction of white masculinity. The marginalization of nonwhite masculinities is part of how the dominant model of masculinity is constructed.

Since its original formulation in 1982, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been employed in a wide range of research settings and contexts. Database searches reveal 200 articles that use *hegemonic masculinity* in the title or abstract; a wider search reveals articles in the many hundreds (R. W. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Not surprisingly, the concept has come under criticism as well.

Some theorists point to the ambiguity of hegemonic masculinity as a concept; if so few men actually conform to the demands of hegemonic masculinity, what is it exactly that we're studying? The historical and cultural contingency of hegemonic masculinity raises similar problems of identifying which group precisely represents the concept in any given setting. Others suggest that this particular way of understanding masculinity doesn't place enough emphasis on the role of power in gender relations. The men who conform to hegemonic masculinity may not necessarily be the most powerful men in society. These critics argue that if this is the case, perhaps we should shift our focus to studying the masculinity of the hegemonic, or an examination of the masculinity of those who hold the most powerful positions in society. Regardless of these critiques, hegemonic masculinity remains a useful tool for understanding masculinity. The concept is especially useful for helping us highlight the ways in which gender exerts pressure to conform on men as well as women.

Table 2.3 summarizes the sociological theories of gender.

**TABLE 2.3 ■ Summary of Sociological Theories of Gender**

| Theory | Level | Gender-Specific Theory? |
|---|---|---|
| Sex roles | Individual | No |
| Doing gender | Interactional | Yes |
| Gendered organizations | Institutional | Yes |
| Intersectional | Integrative | No |
| Hegemonic masculinity | Integrative | Yes |

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this chapter, I assured you that there were many good reasons to do the hard work that mastering gender theories involves. You should now begin to consider how different theories of gender can work as lenses, drawing your attention to different aspects of your own life and assisting with the archaeological examination of gender in your particular biography. Hopefully, you've begun to ask yourself questions that are informed by these theories. Does gender feel like a trait or a disposition, something that's an integral part of your identity and the way you think about yourself? How does gender work differently in the different interactions in which you participate? Are the rules or underlying logic of the organizations to which you belong gendered in nature? As we discussed at the beginning, and as we learned through our discussion of intersectionality and integration, the goal is not to pick a winner among the many theories you'll learn; rather, the point is to use what you learn to develop your own unique way of understanding what gender is and what it means to you.

## BIG QUESTIONS

- In this chapter, we discussed individual, interactional, and institutional theories. Which level makes the most sense to you in understanding gender and why? Which level do you think is best at describing the way in which people in your society generally understand gender? Which level is most difficult to understand and why?
- We discussed many theories of gender in this chapter, and we explored only those from a sociological perspective. Why do you think there are so many theories for explaining gender? Does the wide range of gender theories reflect how difficult gender is as a concept to understand, or does it say more about the group of people who study gender? Is it an advantage or disadvantage to those studying gender that so many different theories exist?
- In Chapter 1, you learned about sexual dimorphism and the ways in which gender theorists approach this question. How do the theories in this chapter deal with the question of sexual dimorphism? For each theory, does it seem to rest on the idea that there are two types of bodies, male and female? How important does a belief in objectively real sexes seem to each theory? How well might these theories work in addressing the experiences of transgender and nonbinary people?
- Doing gender as a perspective has been used to explain the categories of social class and race as well as gender. Can any of the other theories in this chapter also be used to explain other categories of difference and inequality, such as race, social class, sexuality, and disability? Do some of the theories seem more flexible than others in being used to explain these other categories? Does this flexibility reflect a strength or weakness of the theory? Should we be able to develop one theory that explains all of these categories? What might that theory look like?

- One central issue raised in this chapter and in Chapter 1 is the diversity of experiences with gender and whether it makes sense to focus our attention on gender when what it means to be gendered is so varied historically and cross-culturally. Is it worthwhile to discuss gender and assume there is something common about that concept across times and places, or are we focusing on a concept (gender) that has no real, consistent meaning?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. For each theory described in this chapter, identify how that perspective would answer the following questions: (a) What is gender? (b) Why does gender inequality exist? (c) What would be the best method for reducing gender inequality? Then think about what your own theory of gender would look like and how it would answer these three fundamental questions. Write a paragraph describing your own theory, and then explain how it could be used to explain a specific example of how gender matters in your own life.
2. Pick one or more of the theories described in this chapter. Then pick a scene from a favorite movie or episode from a television show that involves gender. How could you use this theory to explain the role of gender in that particular scene or episode?
3. Interview several friends, coworkers, or family members about their views on gender. Try to ask questions that help each of your interview respondents explain his or her own particular theory of gender. Then think about how each of the theories outlined by your interview respondents lines up with the theories discussed in this chapter. How does the particular identity of the people you interviewed seem to impact their own particular theory of gender? For example, do older people tend to have different theories of gender than younger people? Are women's and men's theories different? How do college students' theories compare with those of people in the workplace?
4. Make a list of the important aspects of what it means to you to be gendered, including how you think, whom you interact with and how, what you wear, what you do or don't do, and so on. For each item on the list, does this aspect of what it means to you to be gendered apply to every culture or time period? In other words, do you think any of the items on your list are universal (true for everyone in that gender category, everywhere, and in every time period), or are they all specific to your particular culture, time period, and social background? Are they true for people in different racial groups, different social classes, different sexualities, or different nationalities?
5. Try typing *feminist* and *feminism* into a news search engine. What kinds of articles and news stories do you find on these topics? Do feminists seem to be engaged in a great deal of activity, and what kinds of issues do feminists and feminist organizations seem to be

focusing on? What does this suggest about the current state of feminism? Do you see evidence that feminism is entering or already in a fourth wave?

6. Interview a group of friends, coworkers, or family on their views about feminism. You might ask them what they think feminism is, whether they consider themselves a feminist, whether they think being a feminist is a good or bad thing, whom they know (personally or not) to be a feminist, and what they know about the history of the feminist movement or current feminist groups. What do their answers tell you about the history of feminism and the current state of feminism? Why do people tend to identify or not identify as feminists? Do there seem to be differences in the way your interview respondents think about feminism based on their age or other factors (for example, education, race, social class)? How do their responses compare with what you read about feminism in this chapter?

7. The Women's March may be an important part of fourth-wave feminism, but some of the problems of inclusivity still linger. Did the Women's March take an intersectional approach? Do research online about the representation of diverse women among the organizers and participants. Were trans women included? Interview people who attended the initial Women's March or subsequent marches about the demographics of people at the march. Were women of color and working-class women represented?

## KEY TERMS

Accountability
Accounts
Allocation
Backlash
Breach
Complicit masculinity
Confirmation bias
Consciousness-raising
Ethnomethodology
Expressive
Fundamental attribution error
Gender identity
Gendered organization
Hegemonic masculinity
Ideal worker norm
Individual approach
Institutional approaches
Instrumental
Interactionist approaches
Marginalized masculinity
Matrix of domination
Multiple consciousness
Organizational logic
Patriarchal dividend
Private troubles
Privilege
Public issues
Sex categorization
Sex role
Size
Social aggregates
Social role
Sociological imagination
Studying up
Subordinated masculinity
Transmisgynoir

## SUGGESTED READINGS

### ON INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organization. *Gender & Society*, *4*(2), 139–158.

### ON INTERSECTIONALITY

Basu, A. (1995). *The challenge of local feminisms: Women's movements in global perspective*. Westview Press.

Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought*. Routledge.

Collins, P. H., & Andersen, M. L. (1993). *Race, class, and gender*. Wadsworth.

Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of gender*. Yale University Press.

Risman, B. J. (2004). Gender as a social structure: Theory wrestling with activism. *Gender & Society*, *18*(4), 429–450.

### ON THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM

Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (1981). *This bridge called my back: Radical writings by women of color*. Kitchen Table Press.

Walker, R. (1995). *To be real: Telling the truth and changing the face of feminism*. Anchor Books.

### ON DOING GENDER

Kessler, S. J., & McKenna, W. (1978). *Gender: An ethnomethodological approach*. Wiley.

West, C., & Fenstermaker, S. (1993). Power, inequality, and the accomplishment of gender: An ethnomethodological view. In P. England (Ed.), *Theory on gender/feminism on theory* (pp. 151–174). Aldine de Gruyter.

West, C., & Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society*, *9*, 8–37.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, *1*, 125–151.

# 3 HOW DO DISCIPLINES OUTSIDE SOCIOLOGY STUDY GENDER?

## Some Additional Theoretical Approaches

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **3.1** Explain how sex difference research looks at gender.
- **3.2** List and discuss the three main movements that have influenced queer theory.
- **3.3** Summarize how historical power dynamics have shaped gender theory in non-Western cultures.
- **3.4** Define ecofeminism and understand the issues it connects.
- **3.5** Understand how to use theory to think differently about gender.

Gender is a big concept, as we've just begun to discover, and it has important implications for your life in a wide variety of ways. You might think about gender in Anglo-European society up until the point of the second wave of the feminist movement as being invisible, the elephant in the room that no one was talking about.

With the advent of the feminist movement, a lot of people began to notice the rather large elephant in their presence, and you might think about the world since then as an explosion of people thinking about, writing about, and experimenting with gender. This has happened in many different disciplines and areas of life, so the study of gender is an inherently interdisciplinary one. This means it takes not just the perspective of sociology but many different perspectives to fully understand how gender works.

Many of the women's studies departments formed during the second wave of the feminist movement on college and university campuses are composed of more than one discipline, and gender studies departments continue to be interdisciplinary. For my women's studies program as an undergraduate, I took courses from English professors, sociologists, and classicists, to name a few. Just as different theories help to give us a full understanding of what gender is and how it works, as we saw in Chapter 2, different disciplines are also important in giving us a complete picture of this phenomenon called gender.

Although sociology is the primary framework we use in our discussion of gender, it certainly wasn't the first or only discipline on the gender scene. This chapter gives a brief overview of some theoretical approaches from disciplines outside sociology, paying special attention to those disciplines we'll be drawing on throughout the book. The list of disciplines that could have been

included in this discussion is endless. For example, the connections between art and gender, architecture and gender, gender and the practice of medicine, and gender and history are all fascinating subjects I encourage you to explore. However, in this chapter, we explore approaches in psychology and anthropology, and then we look at the more recent theoretical areas of queer theory: globalization, development, and the environment.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO GENDER

In the previous chapter, we discussed how theorists using an interactional approach to gender argue that interactional theories are more sociological in nature because they focus on groups rather than on individuals. This is a broad and general distinction to make between sociology and psychology, two disciplines that frequently overlap. In fact, classes in social psychology—a particular subdiscipline of sociology or of psychology, depending on whom you ask—are as likely to be taught in sociology departments as they are in psychology departments. In general, though, psychologists are more interested in individuals and the processes that go on in the minds and brains of individuals than are sociologists. For this reason, you can assume that the psychological perspectives we discuss here fit within the category of individual approaches, as discussed in Chapter 2.

### Sex Difference Research

Our first theory in psychology is as much a body of research as it is theory. Sex difference research began during the 1970s in psychology and was initially influenced by the women's movement. **Sex difference research** stands clearly within the individualist approach because its concern is identifying whether a wide range of traits, dispositions, and behaviors differ significantly between men and women. Sex difference researchers, in classic individualist fashion, are interested in how gender operates from the inside out.

Entire books have been written that summarize as well as critique the large volume of findings on sex differences (Deaux & Major, 1990; Eagly, 1987; Epstein, 1988; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Fine, 2011; Jordan-Young, 2010; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974); in addition, countless articles have been published. Given the amount of research, it's not surprising that a great many kinds of differences between men and women have, in fact, been recorded. In their seminal book on the subject of sex differences, Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin (1974) concluded that differences in cognitive abilities between the sexes can be grouped into three domains: mathematical abilities, verbal abilities, and visuospatial abilities. For example, in terms of visuospatial abilities, some research suggests that women are better at decoding facial expressions, whereas men are better at visuospatial tasks that involve aiming, such as throwing a ball (Halpern, 1996). These differences are then generally presumed to be "immutable" and "inevitable," or, as Cordelia Fine (2015) describes them, "hard-wired" (p. 145).

Years of subsequent research have sometimes confirmed these general findings and sometimes contradicted them. For example, you may have heard of research demonstrating that men have better mathematical abilities than women. This often-cited difference is based primarily

on a study of SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores—and thus relies on men's and women's performance on a standardized test (Benbow & Stanley, 1980, 1983). The study was biased in that it used a sample of 50,000 high-ability students, but can you imagine other problems with using performance on standardized tests to measure mathematical ability?

Not surprisingly, the more math classes you take, the better you are likely to do on the math portion of the SAT, and studies have shown that boys are encouraged to take math classes in school to a much greater extent than are girls (Buchmann et al., 2008; Caplan & Caplan, 1997). Boys' better performance on the SAT may therefore reflect a social pressure to take more math classes rather than any inherent superiority in mathematical ability.

Other research has demonstrated a great deal of global variation in men's and women's mathematical abilities. Research suggests that although boys perform slightly better than girls in France and Israel, girls and boys perform equally well in England and Japan, whereas girls outperform boys in Iceland, Finland, and Thailand (Baker & Jones, 1993; Yucel, 2007). Japan sends no girls to the International Mathematical Olympiad, a competition that involves 95 countries, while neighboring South Korea sends seven girls to the competition (Fine, 2015). If differences in mathematical ability are universal, how do we account for these variations?

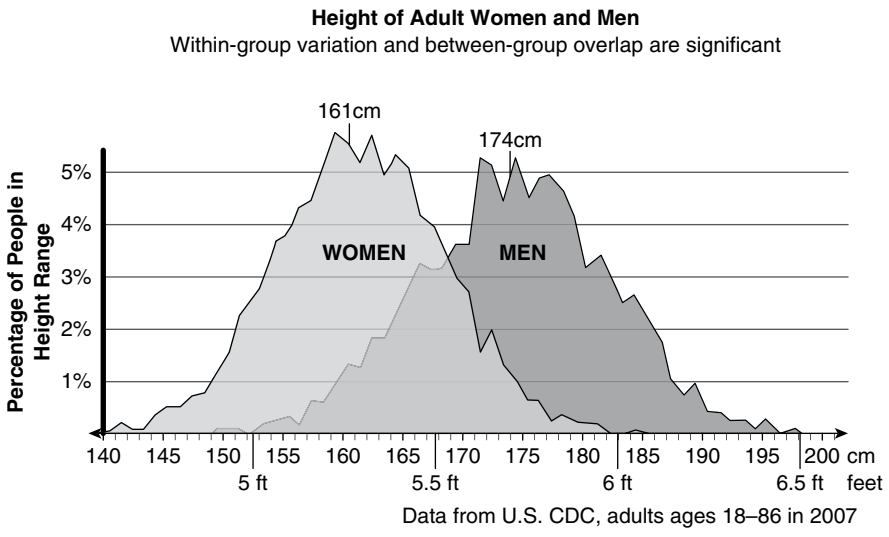
## To Research or Not to Research?

This brief examination of one finding should begin to highlight some problems with this body of research and bring into question what conclusions we can or should draw from it. Early sex difference researchers were motivated by the growing women's movement, and so part of their goal was to challenge many of the unfavorable stereotypes of women that existed at the time (Eagly, 1995). These researchers felt that sex difference research would demonstrate the absence of any essential differences between women and men and that this would help in the goal of reducing inequality. Sex difference research would demonstrate the lack of any important differences and prove that these differences are created by the structures of society, structures that can be changed. But this wasn't exactly the way things went.

The most important findings from Maccoby and Jacklin's (1974) book were that there were *fewer* differences between women and men than many people had expected and that the magnitude of those differences was relatively small (Hyde, 2005). In other words, their main findings were that the differences weren't that many and weren't that great. In fact, this is what most of the research into sex differences has consistently demonstrated. For even the most powerful findings regarding sex differences, the differences are described in terms of averages—average SAT scores or average scores on various types of experiments and tests administered by researchers.

What does an average difference tell us? Because averages are based on the entire range of scores, it means that there's a great deal of overlap for any average difference. A sex difference is considered large when 53% of the scores for any given test overlap. In other words, even for the most notable sex differences, the majority of the scores between men and women still overlap. In Figure 3.1, the dark shaded area represents the considerable overlap between men and women's average heights in the United States. The figure tells us that though there are differences at the extremes of height (the tallest and the shortest people), the majority of women and men overlap

**FIGURE 3.1 ■ Height of Adult Women and Men**




*Source*: Schiebinger, L., Klinge, I., Sánchez de Madariaga, I., Paik, H. Y., Schraudner, M., & Stefanick, M. (Eds.). (2011–2016). *Gendered innovations in science, health & medicine, engineering, and environment*. (genderedinnovations.stanford.edu.)

in their heights. One question posed by many of those critical of sex difference research is this: Why do we seem to be infusing so much importance into what is a relatively small difference? The size of sex differences is the first problem to consider in the research on sex differences.

The second problem with this body of research relates to how sex differences stand up when examined across age and ethnicity as well as across societies, social contexts, and time periods (Fine, 2011). If a difference in mathematical ability is truly rooted in some biological phenomenon, we shouldn't see changes over time. But this is not the case. The ratio of boys to girls identified as "highly gifted" based on their SAT scores in the early 1980s was 13 to 1; that is, there were 13 boys in this category for every 1 girl. By 2005, this ratio had plummeted to 2.8 to 1, demonstrating significant change in one measure of girls' mathematical ability (Fine, 2015). Across racial and ethnic lines, Asian American girls in the United States are not underrepresented relative to their proportion of the population in events like the International Mathematical Olympiad or the Mathematical Olympiad Summer Program. Though non-Hispanic white girls in North America are underrepresented, this is only true if they were not born in European countries like Romania, Russia, or Ukraine. This particular group of women are 100 times more likely to make it onto the math faculty at prestigious institutions such as Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, or University of California, Berkeley, than their native-born white counterparts, suggesting the importance of cultural background to mathematical ability (Fine, 2015).

One final possible critique of sex difference research is with the conceptualization of sex differences in general. We outlined three areas of possible differences between women and

men: mathematical abilities, visuospatial abilities, and verbal abilities. But how exactly are these conceptualized, and what gender biases might be hidden within these conceptualizations (Galliano, 2003)? The list of abilities included as visuospatial includes reading a map, completing jigsaw puzzles, spatial perception, and the mental rotation of three-dimensional objects (Caplan & Caplan, 1997). Do these different abilities really have that much in common, and do they translate into real-world implications? For example, how does the ability to mentally rotate a three-dimensional object, assuming this is a sex difference for women and men, matter in the course of our daily lives outside the context of an IQ test? In addition, the conceptualization of these concepts often seems to reflect a subtle gender bias. Why should visuospatial skills not include the ability to plan a garden, arrange furniture in a room, or use patterns to make clothing—skills for which women would probably be expected to outperform men (Galliano, 2003)?

This brings us back to the original goal of sex difference research—to demonstrate underlying similarities between women and men—and the direction this body of research actually took. Why is sex difference research such a booming business given the problems we've outlined? The size of sex differences discovered by researchers is generally small, but the structure of both science and public interest means that we focus less attention on the small size of those differences and more attention on the differences themselves (Hyde, 2005). In the world of scientific research, where getting published is important to a successful career, negative findings are never as interesting or publishable as positive findings. Say that, as a psychologist, you hypothesize that there are sex differences in women's and men's ability to play chess (and yes, there is research out there on chess ability; Chabris & Glickman, 2006). You put all the time, money, and energy into setting up and running this experiment. Negative findings would mean you find that your hypothesis was wrong and that there are no important sex differences between women and men in their ability to play chess.

Besides being personally disappointing, negative findings are difficult to publish in academic and scientific journals, and having articles and books published is an important way in which academics and researchers are evaluated in their jobs. The research on sex differences in mathematical abilities we discussed was published in *Science*, a fairly prestigious and widely read magazine. Would that research study have been published had the researchers found no real difference between men and women? Probably not. Sex difference research not only gets published in scholarly journals but also is frequently picked up by the popular press. Differences are perceived as more interesting to both fellow scientists and the general public. Thus, there is some pressure to emphasize the existence of differences rather than the relatively small size of those differences.

## The Bottom Line on Sex Difference Research

As you may have gathered by now, there is a great deal of debate on both the quality of the research on sex differences and the value of sex difference research. Researchers continue to argue that the small average differences that have been demonstrated cannot be ignored, whereas others have suggested that a more productive area of research would be to investigate gender similarities rather than sex differences (Epstein, 1988; Hyde, 2005, 2007). Some researchers point to a fundamental bias in the design of this area of research because it ignores

any differences that exist within sex categories. Why is there not a research agenda focused on uncovering the many ways in which those labeled as women differ from other people labeled as women? Others argue that discovering these very real differences is important because they can have important implications for education and other types of policies that should take these differences into account. For example, Eagly (1995) argued that if there are important visuospatial differences between women and men, programs designed to train individuals on spatial tasks could take into account these differences. On the other hand, those supporting the importance of gender similarities argue that gender difference research can adversely affect women's performance in the workplace, girls' ability to succeed in math, the social support provided to both boys and girls during the equally difficult period of adolescence, and the health of heterosexual relationships (Hyde, 2005).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 3.1

### DO WOMEN AND MEN COOK DIFFERENTLY? SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE KITCHEN

You don't have to look that hard to find some interesting research on sex differences. A quick search of the *New York Times* alone reveals articles on sex differences in rates of Alzheimer's (Press, 2015), autism (Bazeleon, 2007), sweating (Reynolds, 2010), and insomnia (Bakalar, 2005), to name just a few. Recently, some women and men in the world of prestigious restaurants and cooking have suggested that maybe there are sex differences when it comes to preparing food (Simons, 2014). British celebrity chef Tom Kerridge claimed that though he likes having women in the kitchen, their presence also brings down the testosterone level. "It makes it not so aggressive," Kerridge said of having women in the kitchen. "But then, at the same point, a lot of that fire in a chef's belly you need, because you need them to force themselves to be ready for dinner service. That's probably why there are not so many female chefs" (Simons, 2014). Preconceptions surrounding cooking, food, and gender include the idea that while men cook to compete, women cook to nurture; that men are more gadget focused in their cooking; and that meat is manly. Even though studies demonstrate that women still do most of the world's food work, at the level of elite restaurants and cooking, women are far outnumbered by men (Cairns et al., 2010; Lam, 2015). Chef Amanda Cohen dismisses the idea that there are gender differences in cooking and that one gender is better than the other at preparing food. "I think we cook the exact same way," Cohen says. "I hate this argument, when we start breaking it down, of who's a better cook: Do women cook more nurturing? Are men . . . more out-there, doing more modern techniques? No. Everybody cooks the exact same way" (Lam, 2015). Cohen does point out that this lack of differences doesn't mean men and women aren't treated differently as chefs. She points to the ways in which female chefs receive less coverage in the media, which results in less money being invested in their restaurants, decreasing their chances of becoming seen as elite.

Have you seen differences in your own experiences of how women and men cook? If we think of the kitchen as a generally feminine space, why are so many of the world's top chefs still men?

Some research suggests that being exposed to sex difference research reinforces gender inequality as the status quo. A study at the University of Exeter asked subjects to read one of two types of passages—one that supported a view of sex differences as biological, stable, immutable, scientifically established facts and another that presented claims as under debate within the scientific community. Subjects who read the "scientifically established facts" passage were more likely to strongly endorse biological theories of sex difference, to be more confident that society already treats women fairly, and to feel less certain that the status quo in regard to gender is likely to change (Fine, 2015, p. 148). Men who read the "facts" passage were less troubled by gender discrimination than those who read the "debate" passage; they were more likely to agree with statements like "If I worked in a company where my manager preferred hiring men to women, I would privately support him" and "If I were a manager in a company myself, I would believe that more often than not, promoting men is a better investment in the future of the company than promoting women" (Fine, 2015, p. 148). This research raises the possibility that sex difference research may lead people to give up on the possibility of gender inequality in the face of "scientifically proven" difference.

Whatever you yourself make of the evidence on sex differences, four things are important to take away from this discussion. *First*, the task of establishing sex differences beyond any doubt is a complex and difficult project, given the problems we've already discussed. *Second*, it's a project that's always going to have implications beyond the realm of scientific research. These findings can and do have real implications for gender inequality in places like schools and the workplace (Weil, 2008). Some schools have experimented with math classes for girls only, based in part on many of the findings in sex difference research on girls' and boys' different mathematical abilities, whereas other schools segregate boys and girls for a wide variety of subjects.

The *third* important thing to take away from our discussion of sex difference research is that it is, for the most part, an example of descriptive research. This means that the research tries to identify whether sex differences exist, but it is not as concerned with explaining the reasons for those differences. Because this research is descriptive rather than explanatory, it's often unclear whether these differences are thought to be a result of *sex*, and therefore rooted in some biological phenomenon, or a result of *gender*, and therefore grounded in social life. Some sex difference research looks at differences in brain anatomy between women and men, and this would seem to be specifically about *sex* research rather than about gender research. But even that distinction is not as clear as it might seem. Cognitive psychologists and other scientists who study the human brain find increasing evidence for its plasticity (Fine, 2011). This means that the actual anatomy of our brains can change as a result of the experiences we have throughout our lives. If women and men have different experiences because they live in a gendered social world, those differences might well be written into the physical structure of their brains.

Finally, the *fourth* consideration to take from sex difference research raises an important question we explore throughout this book: What is the connection between difference and inequality? Many of those who believe sex difference research is not a productive or worthwhile area of inquiry base their arguments in part on the belief that searches for difference are the same as searches for inequality. They point to the ways in which many of the findings of sex difference research seem to demonstrate men's superiority in the skills and abilities most valued by society. Differences, according to these researchers, are almost always translated into a power imbalance (Hollander & Howard, 2000).

On this side of the argument, similarities can be drawn between sex difference research and the body of research, most of which was conducted in the 18th and 19th centuries, that sought to find biological evidence for racial differences. Few would argue that these studies of skull size and other features of anatomy were not connected to a larger project of demonstrating the racial inferiority of nonwhite races and, therefore, that difference was not connected to inequality. Others argue that difference does not have to lead to inequality if those differences are equally valued by society (Eagly, 1995). Investigating sex differences, they say, does not inevitably lead to a story about feminine inferiority but to an honest acknowledgment of the fundamental ways in which women and men are different from each other. If we value those differences equally, this does not have to lead to gender inequality. This question continues to be debated in the area of sex difference research, and it is a question we will take up again.

## QUEER THEORY

We might add one more problem to the body of research on sex differences—it's very binary in its approach. It mostly assumes there are people called females and people called males, and there are important differences to be discovered between them. But what about the people who don't fit perfectly into those two categories? If sex difference research is based on the continuing existence of categories like sex category and gender, queer theory pushes us to explode those categories once and for all.

It might be important before we delve into the substance of queer theory to say a bit about the usage of the word *queer*. As queer theory and sociology teach us, language matters. It is an act of empowerment to take a word that has been used as an insult against a group to which you belong and to claim it for yourself and the group. The term *queer* is used both to offend the sensibilities of the general public and to anticipate its use as a term of abuse (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). But the word *queer* also fits well with what we will discuss as part of the ideological and theoretical agenda of queer theory. The dictionary meaning of *queer* is "not usual," "eccentric," or "suspicious." A theory that is queer is therefore a strange or unusual theory, a theory that is different in some important way. It is just this type of rather eccentric and suspicious theory that queer theorists have set about to produce.

Queer theory can trace its beginnings to several sources. For the sake of simplicity, we'll focus on the influence of three main movements—the gay and lesbian rights movement, postmodernism/poststructuralism, and feminism. We've already discussed a broad outline of feminism in the previous chapter, so here, we'll look at the specific threads in feminist thought that have most influenced queer theory.

### Origins in the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement

Let's begin with the gay and lesbian rights movement and the specific period of the gay and lesbian rights movement that began in the United States with the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969. Many who study gay and lesbian movements argue that this event, when gay and transgender men fought back against police who were raiding a gay bar, marks the beginning of

a period of gay affirmative politics lasting into the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, gay and lesbian activists fought successfully to have homosexuality removed as a category of mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a central document produced by the American Psychiatric Association and used by psychologists and psychiatrists to diagnose their patients. This was important in removing some of the stigma associated with homosexuality being considered a mental illness equivalent to schizophrenia, multiple personality disorder, or anorexia. Observers of the movement argued that by the beginning of the 1980s in the United States, gays and lesbians had reached a level of social tolerance and some recognition as a valid subculture or group within the larger society (Altman, 1982).

Like many movements that were part of the global social movement cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, the gay and lesbian rights movement began to face internal problems as well as an antigay backlash as the movement moved into the 1980s and 1990s. The backlash was brought about by the rise to power of conservative elements in the political scene in the United States—namely the election of Ronald Reagan and the brief dominance of Republicans in both houses of Congress (Seidman, 1992). This backlash was given more strength by the growing recognition of the AIDS epidemic and its association with gay communities (Seidman, 1996). Although the AIDS crisis demonstrated the strength of organizations and institutions that had been created within the gay and lesbian movement and reinforced many alliances that had already been made, it also pushed the movement in a more radical direction. For many of the activists involved in the movement, it led to questioning of the effectiveness of the politics of minority rights and inclusion (Seidman, 1996).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 3.2

### WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE STORY OF ACT UP

Before AIDS became AIDS, it was originally known as GRID—gay-related immune deficiency, reflecting how little we knew about the disease as well as how deeply it was associated with the homophobia of the 1980s. In the first five years of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, 40,000 people died with no response from the government or pharmaceutical companies and little coverage from mainstream media. Gay communities were being decimated by the disease and no one cared. Enter ACT UP, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. The organization was founded in 1987, with a fiery speech in New York by writer Larry Kremer. The Supreme Court had just upheld an antisodomy law, and at a meeting at the Lesbian and Gay Center, Kremer asked half the audience to stand up. He told them they'd all be dead in six months, so what were they going to do about it? Though cisgender, gay, white men weren't the only people dying from AIDS, the media rejected images that reflected the diversity of AIDS patients as well as those fighting to bring awareness about the disease. Despite this white, cis, and male face of the disease, ACT UP took its tactics and inspiration from the legacy of the civil rights movement, Latin American student movements, the Black Panthers, and women's reproductive rights movements. ACT UP members learned about direct action from the civil rights movement and were tutored in social movement tactics by lesbians with experience in the feminist health movement. As an intersectional organization that crossed gender,

racial, and social class identities, ACT UP dealt with these differences through a very loose organizational structure, allowing different groups to pursue actions tailored to their own interests and style. So while some ACT UP members were working from inside institutions—having high-level meetings with pharmaceutical companies—other groups distributed condoms at bars and schools or disrupted Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Though biases emerged within the movement toward women or people of color, activists did not stop the drive toward action to call out these inequalities(Sanders, 2021). What are other examples of social movement groups that have to deal with different interest, tactics, and aims? What are the best strategies for an intersectional movement, especially one in which tensions emerge between different groups?

Connecting this to our discussion of the feminist movement in the previous chapter, many gay and lesbian activists began to doubt the ultimate usefulness of the master frame of civil rights. Early in the movement, gays and lesbians argued for rights based on their shared humanity or on the assumption that they were fundamentally similar to heterosexuals. This is also the basic ideology that underpins liberal feminism: Women and men are fundamentally alike once societal barriers and prejudice are removed. Like many radical feminists, some gay and lesbian activists began to lose faith in this liberalist frame. In the face of the conservative backlash and the stigmas associated with increasing awareness of AIDS, many gays and lesbians began to question whether persuading the rest of society that they were just like them was the best strategy.

Along with this backlash from the outside, the gay and lesbian rights movement began to face its own internal contradictions—again, similar to those faced by feminists of the second wave. These internal contradictions had to do with the necessity of organizing a social movement around a core identity, and therefore assumed commonality, as opposed to the reality of many different and sometimes contradictory experiences. For example, one of the key activists in the Stonewall riot, Martha P. Johnson, was a trans woman of color, but it would take many years before the key role of transgender activists like Johnson would be acknowledged. Divisions also sometimes emerged between lesbians and gay men. The Gay Liberation Front, a social movement organization founded in New York City in the wake of the Stonewall riots, was originally composed of both gay men and lesbian women (Seidman, 1993). But tensions developed between lesbian feminists, who were engaged in a critique of male domination while fighting discrimination, and homosexuals and gay men who were less concerned with male domination.

These two goals put lesbian feminists at odds with gay men, who, as men, might benefit from systems of gender inequality. These tensions sometimes led to lesbian feminists forming their own separate organizations and movements. Other tensions were similar to those encountered in the second wave of the feminist movement, which focused on racial and class differences among lesbians and gays. Women and men of color criticized the gay rights movement for devaluing their own experiences and insight and argued that the movement and its ideology reflected a white, cisgender, middle-class bias (Seidman, 1996). As with feminism, questions arose about whether it was possible for one movement to represent and organize around the

experiences of all lesbians and gays, given the vast differences in their experiences. The result was a lingering question: Is there such a thing as a unified homosexual identity?

## Enter Postmodernism/Poststructuralism

This question resonated with a broad theoretical and ideological development that we will call postmodernism/poststructuralism. Like queer theory, postmodernism and poststructuralism span disciplines and are manifested in many forms by theorists, scholars, and activists. The best way to understand the complex collection of theory labeled postmodernism/poststructuralism is to give a brief historical overview of the basic origins of these ideas.

The Enlightenment period in Western society fundamentally transformed the ways in which people in the global North, and eventually the global South, understood themselves, their societies, and their relationship to their environments. The Enlightenment was characterized by the emergence of science as we now know and understand it and, along with that, a profound faith in rationality and progress. Many Enlightenment thinkers, including some of the founders of sociology, believed that science would help us solve most of the problems of human societies, like poverty, war, disease, and inequality.

Great things came out of what postmodernists would refer to as the Enlightenment project. Democracy, with its trust in the ability of rational citizens to govern themselves, is a product of the Enlightenment. Scientific thinking has cured many diseases and greatly expanded the average life expectancy of people globally, although especially in the developed world. Technology evolving from science has made life easier for many people. You can see how the idea of progress is compatible with both rationality and science; postmodernists argue that during the modern period that began with the Enlightenment, the prevailing ideology saw humans as engaged in a linear evolution toward a better way of living and being as humans. More simply put, things were getting better, and they would continue to do so. That was part of the grand story that modernist thinking told about history.

A basic way to understand postmodernism/poststructuralism is as a radical rethinking of all those Enlightenment ideas and of this grand story of progress in general. Maybe we are not moving forward and getting better after all. Maybe rationality and science will not solve all of our problems; in fact, maybe they will just create new and bigger problems. Maybe grand stories of any kind that attempt to represent the truth are not to be trusted.

What would lead to such a deep questioning of these modern ideas?

Many point to specific historical events that led to this radical ideological turn. Although science has helped to cure diseases and give us longer lives, it has also produced nuclear and biological weapons—technologies capable of destroying all life on our planet. The same rationality that gave us democracy was also employed by Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich in their frightening application of efficiency to murdering millions of Jewish people, homosexuals, and other genetic undesirables during World War II. The rise of social science disciplines, according to poststructuralist Michel Foucault, led to a new kind of disciplinary power and monitoring of behavior but not necessarily an increase in personal freedom (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Although democracy as an institution seemed to work well for many people in the developed world, billions of others in the developing world continued to suffer under

totalitarian regimes and were made into bystanders to the march of "progress" enjoyed by those of us in the global North. Postmodernism/poststructuralism can be understood as a way of resolving the crisis of these contradictions—the fact that the Enlightenment project did not turn out quite as expected.

The aspect of this ideological turn most important to queer theory is the distrust of grand narratives, or what postmodernists sometimes call *meta-narratives* (Lyotard, 1979/1984). A **meta-narrative** is any attempt at a comprehensive and universal explanation of some phenomenon. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is an example of a meta-narrative that attempts to explain the diversity and forms of biological life on the planet, and it has become the predominant meta-narrative in biology and, some would argue, in social theory as well. Science itself is a meta-narrative because it seeks to develop theories that explain the way the universe works. The story of inevitable human progress aligned with rationality and science that characterized the Enlightenment is also an example of a meta-narrative.

What's so bad about meta-narratives? We have already begun to discover that the more broadly you cast your theory or explanation, the more likely you are to miss the experiences of some groups of people. Feminist theories originated by women in the global North did not always take into account the lives of those in the global South. Activists organized around the issues of gay men may not have taken into account or may in fact have worked against the issues of lesbian women. Trying to develop these meta-narratives inevitably leaves someone at the margin or attempts to force their experiences into the grand story being told. As we mentioned earlier, meta-narratives as claims to knowledge have power implications for those who don't fit. If I define what it means to be a man in a certain way and you don't fit that definition, you're not as likely to receive the privileges that go along with being defined as a man.

How does this connect back to some of the problems we left off with in the gay and lesbian rights movement? First, postmodernism/poststructuralism would argue that the master frame of civil rights that underpinned liberal feminism and the early stages of the gay rights movement in the United States is another example of a meta-narrative. Remember that this model made a claim to basic rights for a wide variety of groups based on their common humanity. But there are deep and problematic contradictions in this meta-narrative of liberalism and civil rights. Within this meta-narrative, basic rights are distributed based on our common humanity, but certain groups (for example, African Americans, women, homosexuals, the disabled) are perceived as suffering as a result of their exclusion from this common humanity. Their movements to claim those rights are then based on the very "minority" identity (being Black, a woman, gay or lesbian, or disabled) that led to their exclusion in the first place.

Movements organized around a civil rights frame are built on the fundamental contradiction of using the essential structure of *difference* as a basis for identity (we're all Black, we're all women, we're all homosexual, we're all disabled) to claim rights based on claims of essential *similarity* (we're all human). Within queer theory, postmodernism/poststructuralism, and third-wave feminism, theorists and activists began to wonder whether this contradiction implied that the only way for groups to gain their basic rights was for them to look like, act like, and be like the dominant group to prove that they were in fact all human (Turner, 2000). Gays and lesbians would be given their basic human rights only when they stopped acting like gays and lesbians, or when they stopped being different.

The other way in which postmodern/poststructuralist ideas about meta-narrative intersect with both the gay and lesbian and the feminist movements is in regard to identity claims themselves. Here, postmodernism asks whether anyone really can make the claim "We're all Black," "We're all women," or "We're all gay." Here is an important point of intersection between directions in third-wave feminism and those of postmodernism. In Chapter 2, we discussed third-wave feminism as a reaction to the contradictions of the second wave, centered on the ways in which other identities intersected with gender. Women of color, working-class women, and lesbian women felt that feminism often embodied a white, middle-class, heterosexual bias. Postcolonial theory pointed to the very different experiences of women outside the developed world. Third-wave feminism attempts to respond to these problems and questions. Feminists like Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Helene Cixous, and Teresa de Lauretis attempted to answer this question: If there is no unified identity called *woman*, where do we go from here?

In practical terms, how do you organize a social movement around a category that you suspect might not be real? As postmodernists would argue, any story about what unites a particular group of people in all times and all places under the category *woman* is a meta-narrative. The solutions various feminists proposed to these problems were various and somewhat complicated. Where we are left at the convergence of these three threads—the gay and lesbian rights movement, third-wave feminism, and postmodernism—is with a deep and abiding mistrust of claims to ultimate "truth," especially as they exist in the form of meta-narratives and categories of identity.

## Three Key Features of Queer Theory

Queer theory, you might be thinking, had better be a fairly impressive theory to get us out of this particular theoretical and ideological corner we've backed ourselves into. But queer theory has no intention of solving any of the problems, because that would involve reestablishing another meta-narrative or claim to truth. If the crises we've identified here serve to pull the metaphorical rug out from under your feet, queer theory points to the importance of realizing there was never any clear place to stand to begin with; the rug didn't really exist. This is the *queerness* of queer theory—the tendency to view any firm theoretical footing with some suspicion—and it makes this set of theories somewhat difficult to understand compared with the kinds of theories we're accustomed to. We can get a little bit more specific about the loose group of theorists and activists working under the umbrella of queer theory, though, and identify three features of queer theory as a general orientation.

*First, queer theory as a theoretical approach is distrustful of categories*, and as a social movement, it works to do away with categories in their current form. This distrust begins with the categories specifically related to sexuality, like gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual, transgender, intersexual, and so on. The use of *queer* as a way of self-identifying among these groups represents an "aggressive impulse of generalization" (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi) and an attempt to disrupt our conceptions of what is normal. Categories of identity, as we've discussed, are incomplete and can never successfully encompass all the diversity contained within.

Take the category of heterosexual man. Generally, you'd expect that people within that category are people who identify as men and are romantically, sexually, and/or emotionally

attracted to people who identify as women. But in her research of ads on the website Craigslist for Los Angeles, Jane Ward (2008) found this wasn't necessarily the case. Men who identified as straight (str8, in the language of Craigslist) and white posted ads seeking sex with other men while still identifying as heterosexual. For these men, actively and enthusiastically seeking sex with other men didn't alter their identity as heterosexuals, which they saw as cultural as much as it was behavioral. If the category of heterosexual includes men who want to have sex with other men, then what does the category of heterosexual really mean? The category of heterosexual, like all categories, is inherently unstable. Categories are always on uncertain ground (Gamson & Moon, 2004).

Queer theory doesn't just stop there, though, with the radical deconstruction of categories related to sexuality. At least in many parts of Anglo-European society, categories of sexuality assume categories of sex and gender. You can't be a lesbian or gay without the existence of some sense of gender or sex, because without those categories, it makes no sense to distinguish people based on the sex or gender of those with whom they choose to have sex or to whom they are attracted. Drawing on its feminist lineage, queer theory questions categories of gender as well. And from there, in its most transgressive forms, queer theory questions all categories, because all categories have these same fundamental flaws. How do we define what it means to be a member of a particular race in the United States? The particular mode of definition based on government census categories has changed every 10 years since the government began conducting a census in 1790. What made you white in 1790 is not the same as what makes you white in the 21st century, so how can we assert there is such a thing as being white?

One solution proposed by queer theory to the problems with categories of identity is to think of these categories as always open and fluid. You might think of *this second feature of queer theory as suggesting that everyone can, in fact, be queer and that everyone already is, in fact, queer*. In her book, Kate Bornstein (1994) pointed out that gender as a system is problematic for individuals like her, who never felt they fit in, but also that "eventually the gender system lets everyone down" (p. 80). At some point, everyone—straight, gay, feminine, masculine, intersex, transgender—fails to live up perfectly to the demands placed on us by gender and is therefore hurt by this system. Heterosexual men in Anglo-European society are not supposed to show affection to other men except in appropriate ways and venues (the slap on the butt during a sporting event), and many would argue that forbidding expressions of affection among any group of people goes against our basic human tendencies and is a form of oppression. The straight man who hugs his male friend for a little too long is likely to be sanctioned in some way for not perfectly conforming to his particular category and, in this way, is let down by the gender system. The way categories of gender and sexuality are constructed affects all of us, regardless of where we fall within those categories, and this makes all of us queer in some way relative to the categories. The existence of these categories imposes on or disciplines all of us, and none of us conform to them perfectly.

This connects to the *third feature of queer theory: its ambition to queer many features of academic and social life that are generally considered within the bounds of normality*. Queer theory aspires to be not just a theory of sexuality or of gender and sexuality but to be a broad and far-reaching social theory (Gamson & Moon, 2004; Seidman, 1996). This is because queer theorists believe that sexuality is an important way in which knowledge and power in society

are organized and that a theory of sexuality is, therefore, a theory of society in general. This can be understood as the difference between thinking about what "gay and lesbian studies" means as compared with "queer studies." Departments and programs in gay and lesbian studies have grown in Anglo-European societies as part of the success of the gay rights movement. What would be the implied object of study of a gay and lesbian studies program? You might study the history of gay and lesbian peoples, literature about homosexuality, or literature produced by gays and lesbians. You might look at the portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media or how science has been used to explain and sometimes control homosexuality. These topics and many more might be covered in a program in gay and lesbian studies, but the main object of study would be homosexuality or, maybe, sexuality more generally.

Table 3.1 summarizes these three features of queer theory.

For queer theorists, this leaves out an important part of the theoretical picture. It segments the study of homosexuality from the study of the larger society that created it and continues to re-create it. Gays and lesbians exist only in opposition to straight people. Queer theorists would argue that studying only gays and lesbians produces an incomplete picture of how sexuality works to produce identities such as straight and gay. For that reason, queer theory is just as concerned with studying heterosexuality as it is with homosexuality and with investigating how sexual practices permeate all aspects of society. A queer studies program would look at all types of literature, not just that which focuses on gays and lesbians or is written by them, arguing that sexuality is an integral part of all cultural productions. Queer studies, rather than focusing on the portrayal of gays and lesbians in the media, would also examine the portrayal of heterosexuality in the media. Science would be studied in queer studies for the ways in which it is used to create many categories of difference rather than solely for how it applies to issues of sexuality. For queer studies, the object of study would be society itself.

An example might help to demonstrate how this works. Through an examination of literary works, Eve Sedgwick (1985) explored a concept she called *homosociality*. **Homosociality** is the continuum of cooperative relations between people of the same gender, and it ranges from actual homosexual intimacy to same-sex friendships. Sedgwick argued that there are differences in homosociality between women and men; men perceive the distance on this continuum between male friendships and actual homosexuality (sex between men) as much further apart than do women. **Homophobia**, the fear or disavowal of homosexuality, is much more likely to arise among homosocial groups of nongay men than it is among nongay groups of women. Thus, sexuality is connected to notions of gender difference because masculinity and femininity are defined in part by these differences in homosociality. What Sedgwick's notion of homosociality does is place an

**TABLE 3.1 ■ Three Key Features of Queer Theory**

| |
|---|
| Queer theory is distrustful of categories like sex, gender, and race, pointing to how these categories are always incomplete and can never fully contain the diversity contained within any given category. |
| Queer theory suggests that everyone can be queer and that everyone may already be queer because the gender system lets everyone down at some point. |
| Queer theory seeks to "queer," or make strange, all features of social life that are generally considered within the bounds of normality to demonstrate that everything is queer. |

understanding of sexuality firmly in the realm of what many would consider normal—heterosexual people and their nonsexual relationships with others of the same gender. The object of study is not homosexual people but same-sex relationships among straight people and how these are connected to notions of gender. This orientation turns away from a study of homosexuality or homosexual people to a more general concern with how sexuality has impacts on all of us in society. In this sense, queer theory is ambitious in that its goal is no less than to question the truth and usefulness of categories like homosexuality and heterosexuality as a way to explain what sexuality is.

## GENDER THEORIES IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The theories we've discussed in this chapter and in Chapter 2 were all developed primarily in the global North by English-speaking theorists and activists. This doesn't mean that women and men in other parts of the world don't think about, write about, and organize around gender. As we know from an intersectional perspective, the voices of women and men from the global North are more likely to be heard and seen as central to narratives about gender than are the voices of women and men in the global South or non-English-speaking countries (Connell & Pearse, 2015).

How do we go about creating a more global approach to the study of gender? We have to acknowledge that the concerns that shape the theories of gender scholars in Australia may not be the same concerns that shape those of gender scholars in India or France. In fact, some question whether we can even assume that when we use words like *gender, women, men*, and *feminist*, we are successfully communicating across cultural boundaries; perceptions of "gender" in an Anglo-European context are very different from the way gender is conceived of in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, gender may not even be a particularly meaningful category of inequality in some cultures. Is it possible or even desirable to bring these diverse narratives together?

This question is further complicated by the power imbalances that exist between the global North and the global South, as well as a long history of colonial domination and exploitation. For people in the global South, Anglo-European ideas, including those about gender, have often been used to justify oppression; there are good reasons to be distrustful of Western theorizing about gender. To understand the context for gender theories from a non-Western perspective, we first have to understand something about the history of these global power dynamics.

### The Colonial Period

*Colonialism* and *imperialism* are the terms that best describe the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world up until World War II. **Imperialism** refers to economic, political, or cultural domination over nations or communities, while **colonialism** is the building and maintenance of colonies in one region by people from another region (Shaw & Lee, 2015). As we'll discuss, colonialism often had detrimental effects on gender relationships in the colonized culture. Colonizers assumed their presence lessened gender inequality among colonized peoples; the gender ideologies and customs Europeans brought to the rest of the world *had* to be better than those that had existed, simply because Europe (and perhaps the United States) was more advanced than the rest of the world.

But anthropologists and historians have increasingly demonstrated that colonization had varying impacts on gender relations among the cultures of colonized peoples, often including negative impacts. For example, among both the Igbo and Yoruba peoples in Nigeria, women had a great deal of power relative to men in precolonial times (Denzer, 1994; Okonjo, 1976). This institutionalized power usually focused on issues of particular concern to women, which included access to markets, and this demonstrated women's important role in the economic and social life of precolonial African peoples. Much of this power was lost under colonial systems of control.

Other research demonstrates the ways in which colonial land reform resulted in women's loss of status; in placing communal land in the hands of colonial authorities, Europeans imposed their own belief that men should be responsible for the cultivation of land, even in cultures where this had not been the case in precolonial times (Boserup, 1970). This is just one small example of the ways in which the "civilization" that European colonizers believed they were bringing to colonized peoples often made the plight of women worse rather than better.

The imposition of this "civilization" didn't keep indigenous intellectuals in the colonized world from developing their own theories about gender. For example, in Bengal, India, the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee criticized the practice of seclusion, where women were largely confined to the home so they would not be seen by unfamiliar men. Chatterjee also argued that men should do an equal share of housework, a radical idea at the time in most cultures (Connell & Pearse, 2015). As we discussed in Chapter 2, women were often central figures in many movements for independence in the global South. Sometimes, anticolonial struggles included concerns about women's rights. In the former Ottoman Empire, the new state of Turkey included a self-conscious emancipation of women, making it perhaps the world's first example of state feminism (Connell & Pearse, 2015).

## The Development Project

Following the overthrow of colonial power around the world came a new paradigm that would dominate global relations after World War II—the **development project**. The years after World War II saw a shift in thinking in the global North about the proper relationship to former colonial nations. Theorists such as Talcott Parsons and Seymour Martin Lipset put forward the influential perspective of **modernization theory**, positing that the postcolonial world could become like the countries of the developed world if they followed their lead economically, politically, and socially (Lipset, 1959). The developing world, as it was called within this paradigm, could then come to enjoy the fruits of democracy, economic prosperity, improved health, and increased equality that characterized life in countries like those in western Europe and the United States. The development project was put into action through various institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help the developing world begin the process of modernization. In 1949, Harry S. Truman, then president of the United States, gave a speech that nicely summarized the ideology of modernization and the development project:

> We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans. What we envision is a program of development based on the concepts of democratic fair dealing. (as quoted in Esteva, 1992)

This sounds like a pretty good deal for the developing world, and Truman's statement about the basic orientation of the developed world still holds much weight in global politics and economics. The institutions that characterized development, the World Bank and IMF, are still going strong today. Although the development project was not meant to take place through physical force and occupation, some of the common justifications for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that emphasize bringing democracy to those countries are consistent with the goals of modernization theory.

This is also still the goal of many nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, that work in the global South. **Nongovernmental organizations** are organizations that work on various problems that might sometimes be considered the role of government to solve—social, political, economic, or environmental problems—but have no government affiliation and are privately funded entities. The Red Cross, Oxfam, Heifer International, and Doctors Without Borders are all NGOs with which you might be familiar that deal with issues of hunger, refugee populations, disaster relief, and providing needed medical services.

## What About Women?

The development project assumed that modernization would help women and men in postcolonial nations equally, and planners as well as scholars initially ignored the unique role of women in development. Because modernization in the developed world had theoretically brought more equality between women and men, many theorists and practitioners assumed the same would be true in the developing world. But beginning in the 1970s, research increasingly began to question this neglect of women's roles as well as the underlying model of development and modernization theory in general.

In 1970, Esther Boserup published her book *Women's Role in Economic Development*, using a wide range of empirical data about development in Africa and Asia to highlight two simple facts: (1) that a consideration of women's unique roles was important to development and (2) that women were not necessarily benefiting from development in the ways many had expected. Boserup brought in the unique perspective of economics—a field very important to the development project. As you might have guessed, the two organizations most associated with development, the World Bank and IMF, are economic organizations that focus on restructuring a society's economy as a key step in bringing about modernization. Although it may not have been Boserup's intention (Beneria & Sen, 1981), her analysis helped to demonstrate some important gender biases in the conceptualization of development and modernization theory.

Development theory left women out of consideration because of its emphasis on the **formal economy**, that is, the segment of the economy regulated by the government or legal systems, which women are much less likely to participate in. This disguised the huge contributions women made to the support of their families as well as to the economy in general. Development

projects also often hurt rather than helped women's status relative to men, often by forcing men into a wage economy that left women with an increasing burden of household work.

These realizations about the neglect of women's roles in development and the adverse effects of development led to a new perspective, **women in development**, sometimes abbreviated as WID. In 1975, the United Nations held the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City, and it proclaimed the next decade to be the decade of women. Government agencies as well as NGOs began to speak of integrating gender into their preexisting notions of development (Koczberski, 1998). In 1979, the United Nations passed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which recognized global gender inequality and acknowledged that women's problems were unique and required attention different from that necessary to address men's problems (Walter, 2001). The primary goal of the women in development programs was to include women as a way of addressing issues of poverty, welfare, and equity as related to women (Ransom & Bain, 2011). A broad spectrum of organizations began to incorporate women into their development programs (Staudt, 1997; World Bank, UN Food and Agriculture Organization, & International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2009).

## Gender and Development

Beginning in the 1980s, the WID approach came under increasing criticism by those working under the umbrella of gender and development (GAD). The evolution of the gender and development approach was heavily influenced by the rise of both socialist and postcolonial feminism in the global South. Gender scholars in the GAD approach highlighted three main problems in WID. The first addressed the "add women and stir" assumptions of WID; development, they argued, was not best served by a focus exclusively on women and on their integration into the development process (Cornwall, 2003). Rather, the development process itself as a whole should be called into question. Second, GAD proponents took issue with the universalist, one-size-fits-all approach of WID. They argued that there are important differences among women that need to be addressed as well as the unequal power relationships between women and men (Jaquette & Staudt, 2006; Prugl & Lustgarten, 2006). Finally, the GAD approach suggests that by addressing women's poverty instead of the underlying structural problem—capitalism itself—WID is at best a Band-Aid solution. By targeting women instead of the structure of capitalist development that creates gender inequality, WID focuses on the symptom but not the underlying disease.

In contrast to WID, gender and development focuses the development conversation on gender relations and an analysis of the roles and responsibilities assigned to both women and men. Echoing our conversations about radical feminism in Chapter 2, GAD challenges us to reexamine and challenge existing political, social, and economic structures. GAD as a theory and practical approach suggests that maybe the real problem is not women's exclusion from development but the workings of the global economic system itself (Peet & Hartwich, 1999). As part of this shift, scholars and development professionals have begun to consider the role of men and masculinities in development projects (Cornwall, 1997; Grieg et al., 2000). For example, reproductive issues are an important focus of many development projects, and their

efforts have often focused on women. The report of the 1994 United Nations Conference on Population and Development recognized the importance of men taking "responsibility for their sexual and reproductive behavior and their social and family roles" (United Nations, 1994). But the construction and politics of masculinity make policy changes that would change men's roles and burdens around reproduction and family life difficult. Men benefit from not being forced to worry about the consequences of their sexual behavior (Grieg et al., 2000). Nonetheless, to be successful, development programs must involve men in their efforts at social change.

### Decolonizing Development

Do white men rule the world? One network analysis of global elites suggests the answer is a resounding yes (Young et al., 2021). Examining not just corporate boards but think tanks, international nongovernmental organizations, and transnational policy groups reveals that even when people of color or women penetrate into this power elite, they remain in peripheral positions. The inner circle of those making decisions that impact people on a global level is still made up of predominantly white men.

It's no surprise, then, that those working in development around the world have increasingly called for a widespread decolonization of these groups and organizations. As a broad movement, **decolonization** is a process of examining and undoing the privileges that come from the historical and present-day project of colonialism (Silva & Students for Diversity Now, 2018). Decolonization can mean literally restoring land to indigenous groups from whom it was taken or compensating those groups for their lost land. More symbolically, decolonization might involve indigenous land acknowledgment, making a conscious effort to recognize that most of the territory in settler colonies (like the United States, Canada, and Australia) belongs to the indigenous groups it was taken from.

In the development context, decolonization means ending the assumption that international development experts, practitioners, policy makers, and researchers know better than the people in the global South they seek to serve. Calls for the decolonization of development extend older critiques of the power imbalance implied in this model, in which those people who directly benefited from the legacy of colonialism (people from the global North) now instruct the survivors of colonialism (people in the global South) in how to best overcome the obstacles created by colonialism. It's a little like the person who robbed you now also being the person who tells you how to get over it. Efforts to decolonize development would deconstruct this power imbalance, seeking a partnership of equals with those in the global South (Clements & Sweetman, 2020).

## ECOFEMINISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

When you think of the ocean, do you imagine it having a gender? What about a river? A mountain? Do animals have gender? For example, do you tend to think of a cat as feminine and a dog as masculine? What about a bear and a deer? What about nature in general? Does nature, however you might conceive of it, have a gender? Ecofeminism is a theory that explores the

answers to these questions, highlighting the ways in which any consideration of our relationship as humans to the environment, let alone conversations about how we should act in relation to the environment, needs to consider the role of gender.

Ecofeminism as a set of theories originated from tensions similar to those we discussed with development. Many women involved in the environmental movement felt gender was an important concern not being given sufficient attention (Birkeland, 1993). In addition, as many feminists and others turned their attention to the situation of women in the developing world, environmental issues became an important part of understanding their plight. Theoretical developments within feminist theory also contributed to the development of ecofeminism. The relationship between women and nature sometimes served as an important explanatory tool for theories of male domination, but other theories suggested a unique structure to feminine personality that made women's relationship to nature inherently different from men's.

In Chapter 4, we explore in depth Nancy Chodorow's (1974) theory of gender identity development, but her approach implies that women's sense of self does not depend on a sense of separation from others in the same way men's sense of self does. Thus, patriarchy, as an expression of masculinity, reinforces a dualistic sense of nature as opposed to culture. This means nature and culture are perceived as two separate, distinct, and opposed entities or systems. Femininity is constructed to be less trapped by these dualisms, and therefore, a consideration of feminine ways of knowing and experiencing is important to understanding our relationship to nature.

All of these trends resulted in the development of a loose set of theories called ecofeminism or ecological feminism. You could find many competing ways to define this broad range of approaches and concerns, but in general, ecofeminism explores the links between the domination of women and our societal domination of the environment and argues that there are important connections between environmental domination and social domination of all kinds, whether it be on the grounds of gender, race, or class (Bell, 2004). Thus, ecofeminism proposes not just a theory of gender and the environment but also a multiple-issue movement that examines how environmental domination, gender domination, class domination, and racial domination are all interconnected (Gaard, 1993).

In a sense, ecofeminism is interested in hierarchies in general, assuming that many types of hierarchies, including the one between humans and nature, are intertwined. Ecofeminism points to the ways in which nature is often used to reinforce the inferiority of many different groups in society. African Americans in the United States and indigenous peoples around the world have often been associated with savagery or have been considered primitive and therefore closer to nature (Bell, 2004). Historical and contemporary depictions of minority groups in the United States often portray these groups in animalistic ways (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2000; Riggs, 1987). The lower classes are also perceived as being closer to nature and therefore less able to control their animalistic emotions and aggression. And as we've already discussed, women are in many ways considered more natural and, therefore, opposed to culture, reason, and civilization.

Ecofeminism intersects with the concerns raised about women's roles in development in that it demands that attention be paid to gender issues in a theory and movement (environmentalism) that did not initially consider gender. Like queer theory, ecofeminism has ambitions to be a much broader social theory rather than being confined to issues of gender and

the environment. Thus, ecofeminists have begun to explore the implications of their approach to development and modernization as well as their connections with other social movements related to the environment, such as the environmental justice movement (Buckingham, 2004; Smith, 1997; Taylor, 1997).

## HOW DO WE USE THEORY?

You might think of the first section of this book as a theoretical boot camp. No one's barked orders at you or forced you to shave your head (yet), but in three chapters, you've been exposed to an intense dose of theoretical perspectives on gender. Boot camp is, among many other things, an attempt by the military as an institution to resocialize its recruits into the norms of being a soldier, including developing a sense of the importance of the chain of command and encouraging cohesiveness within military units. There's no way to accomplish that radical kind of resocialization through a book, but presenting these theories is a way to socialize you into a new way of thinking about the role of gender in your own life.

Hopefully, reading about some of these theories has led you to question your own working explanation of gender and has allowed you to add new ways of thinking about gender that might not have occurred to you. Undoing previous ways of thinking and establishing new ones is a form of resocialization, so there's a chance that these chapters have at least begun that process. What should you now do with the wide range of theoretical perspectives with which you've been drilled? Before we move on to the remainder of the book, where we'll be revisiting how to apply these theories throughout each chapter, four useful pieces of advice are provided as a brief survival guide to negotiating the complex world of gender theory.

The first piece of advice is fairly simple: Don't panic! Yes, there are a lot of theories out there about gender—more, in fact, than the few we've covered in these first chapters. Yes, these theories are often complicated, weird, vague, and sometimes difficult to understand. Yes, different theories sometimes say contradictory things, and that can seem frustrating and confusing. All of these facts can be overwhelming, but remember our earlier discussions about the purpose of learning theory. Learning and critically examining theories about gender is like taking your own ideas about gender for a test flight. How do your own ideas about gender stand up to all the other ways in which feminists, sociologists, psychologists, economists, and so on have thought about gender? The point is to use these theories about gender to raise some interesting questions about what gender is and how it works. Theories are tools, and tools are instruments that help you accomplish whatever your goal might be. As with any tool, in the end, you get to decide when and how to use it. So don't panic. You *can* learn how to use the tools we call gender theories.

Because theories are like tools, the second piece of advice is to pack light and take what you need. It's OK to pick and choose which parts of theories you think make sense and which parts you think don't. This is a tried-and-true method for building your own theory, which we'll talk about as the fourth piece of advice. Learning how to think about gender involves learning which tools work best for you, and that means sifting through not just each theory as a whole but parts of each theory or approach as well. There's no rule that says you have to believe everything one

theory says, so think about what aspects of different theories are most important or useful to you as you develop your own understanding of gender and how it works. Take what you need from these many different theories and feel free to leave the rest.

The third piece of advice on using gender theories is not to get bogged down in conflict. We discussed how sociological theories of gender are moving toward an integrative approach, trying to bring together the many different theoretical approaches within sociology to develop a more complex picture of how gender works. "Give up on the idea of a world champion" might be one way to think of this piece of advice. Comparing different theoretical approaches and testing their relative strengths for explaining different gendered situations and phenomena is a good idea. But it's OK if there's no winner and if a theory that works well at explaining the way gender works in one context (the global North) falls somewhat flat in a different context (the global South). If learning about gender using a sociological perspective can teach us anything, it's that the way gender works in the world is probably too complex to be reduced to one theoretical explanation.

The final piece of advice in this survival guide for gender theory is to study and learn the skills of the trade. Be adaptable, and you, too, can build your own theory. The point in learning these theories is not to convert you to a particular way of thinking but to give you the skills to develop your own perspective. All the pieces of advice build toward this final goal, which is to start you on your own path toward developing a way of making sense of the role of gender in your life. Learning how to use and apply these theories of gender is something like an apprenticeship in which you get to practice using the tools of the trade. In the end, if you've paid attention and done your fair share of work, you should have a stronger and more fully developed sense of your own theoretical perspective on gender. This isn't to say that all your questions about gender will be answered, but you should have a better sense of what questions are most important to you as well as a sense of how to go about asking and answering those questions.

To help you work toward this final goal, we'll be working at two different levels throughout the rest of this book. First, we'll move into a topical exploration of gender, beginning with an exploration of how gender permeates our everyday lives and interactions. Although we'll be moving back and forth throughout the book, in this section on how our lives are filled with gender, we'll focus more on the individual and interactional levels. We'll look at how we learn gender, how gender and sexuality intersect, how gender matters for friendship and intimacy, and how gender impacts various issues connected to our bodies.

In the next section, we'll shift our focus to the institutional level with an examination of how gender functions in society as a whole. We'll look at the relationship between gender and institutions such as marriage, work, the media, and politics and government. Throughout these explorations of particular ways in which gender is manifested, you shouldn't forget that the theories we've covered are still out there, lurking somewhere in your consciousness. At this first level, I encourage you to think about how the theories we've covered work in explaining the specific examples of gender you'll be reading about throughout the next chapters. Use the details and examples from each chapter to test the different theories you've learned and to help you work toward building your own theory. At the second level, and to help make sure you don't forget the theories we've so painstakingly explored in these first chapters, I'll be alerting you to the moments when particular theories are being used or when they are particularly applicable

to the situation being discussed. These Theory Alerts will demonstrate how the theories we've covered in these first three chapters can be applied to the specific topics discussed in each subsequent chapter and serve as examples and models for you of how these theories can be applied to specific situations, therefore helping you identify their strengths and weaknesses. You might think of the Theory Alerts as a do-it-yourself demonstration of how to use theory; I'll show you how a particular theory might be applied in the hope that it will help you figure out how to eventually do it yourself.

## BIG QUESTIONS

- In Chapter 2, we discussed the three levels in sociological theories about gender—individual, interactional, and institutional—and where each of these locates gender. How do the theories we discussed in this chapter seem to line up with these three levels? Where do these different theories seem to locate gender?
- In this chapter, we explored gender theories in disciplines outside sociology. How would you describe to someone who is not familiar with sociology as a discipline what is unique about a sociological approach to gender? Where does a sociological approach to gender overlap with that of other disciplines? Is it useful to divide our approach to gender along disciplinary boundaries?
- Some theories in this chapter use a biosocial approach to the study of gender, assuming two distinct types of bodies: male and female. Which theories would you characterize as biosocial? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these theories? What do you think is or should be the role of biology in the study of gender? How would you resolve the nature-versus-nurture debate as it relates to gender?
- Anthropologists as well as evolutionary psychologists assume there are important connections between the behavior of animals (and especially our primate relatives) and our own behavior. Do you agree with these connections? How much can we learn about ourselves as human beings from the animal world? What are potential limits to this approach? What does this approach presume about our place in nature? (Are humans a part of nature or outside nature?)
- Many gender theories, including some of those we discussed in this chapter, attempt to find one unitary cause for gender inequality across all times and cultures. Do you believe it is possible to find one such explanation for gender inequality? Is this an example of a search for a meta-narrative, as described by queer theory, and what problems might that present?
- Queer theory provides a critique of meta-narratives, or big stories that attempt to explain some phenomenon. Can you have a theory that doesn't include some kind of meta-narrative? Does queer theory have its own meta-narrative, and if it doesn't, can it really be a theory?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. For each of the theories described in this chapter, identify how that perspective would answer the following questions: (a) What is gender? (b) Why does gender inequality exist? (c) What would be the best method for reducing gender inequality? Then think again (as you did at the end of Chapter 2) about what your own theory of gender would look like and how it would answer these three fundamental questions. Write a paragraph explaining how the addition of these new theories changed or did not change your own initial theory.

2. Go to an academic search engine that includes a broad range of psychological journals. Search for the term *sex differences* and see how many articles are returned. What general trends can you identify in the areas in which psychologists look for sex differences and in the kinds of sex differences that emerge? How important do these sex differences seem to be? Do the articles imply that these are sex differences (and therefore rooted in biology) or gender differences (and therefore in part a result of social causes) or some mixture of the two?

3. Come up with a list of objects or phenomena that you consider part of nature, as many as you can think of. Conduct an informal survey with friends, family, and coworkers, asking them the gender of the various items on your list. For example, is a river masculine or feminine? You might also ask your respondents why they think certain objects are gendered. Does the gender assigned by your respondents to various objects seem consistent for different people? Ask them whether they think nature in general has a gender, what it is, and why. How do these views line up with how your respondents think about the environment? How does this line up with ecofeminism as a theoretical perspective?

4. According to Kate Bornstein (1994) and queer theory, the gender system lets all of us down at some point. Free-write about times in your own life when the gender system seemed to let you down. Can you think of times when you weren't able to do something you wanted to do because of your gender? Times when you felt hurt, left out, or rejected as a result of your gender? Times when you felt you could not fully or perfectly live up to the gender expectations of your culture or group? Were there repercussions for not being able to live up to those gender expectations? Is Bornstein right in saying that we're all hurt to some extent by the gender system, and so none of us perfectly fits into categories of gender or sexuality?

5. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) both publish annual reports on the social, economic, and environmental conditions around the world, and especially in the global South. Explore these reports at the websites listed at the end of this section. How are their findings consistent with the women-in-development approach and ecofeminism? Does gender seem to be an important part of many UN programs? Do the programs and goals of the

UN seem to reflect the goals set by the development project and modernization theory? Do they seem influenced by world systems theory or dependency theory?

**a.** United Nations Development Programme: www.undp.org
**b.** United Nations Population Fund: www.unfpa.org

## KEY TERMS

Colonialism
Decolonization
Development project
Formal economy
Homophobia
Homosociality
Imperialism
Meta-narrative
Modernization theory
Nongovernmental organizations
Sex difference research
Women in development

## SUGGESTED READINGS, PODCASTS, WEBSITES, AND VIDEOS

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PART II

# HOW ARE OUR LIVES FILLED WITH GENDER?

# 4 HOW DO WE LEARN GENDER?

## Gender and Socialization

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **4.1** Describe some problems with traditional methods of determining whether a person is male or female.
- **4.2** List and describe four theories that examine the process of gender socialization.
- **4.3** Summarize some key ways gender socialization happens early in life.
- **4.4** Discuss how secondary socialization shapes ideas of gender throughout a person's life.
- **4.5** Explain how gender rules change (or don't) as individuals age.

What's the first thing you remember? How old were you, and what were you doing? Is gender an important part of your first memory? Did it matter that you were a little boy or a little girl, or do you think that, at that point, you were aware of yourself as a boy or a girl or some other gender—as a gendered human being? Did the gender that everyone told you that you were feel right or wrong?

Can you remember the first time you thought of yourself as having a gender? Can you remember the first time someone treated you in a way that was obviously related to your gender? Do you remember a time when you didn't understand what gender was and couldn't necessarily tell the gender of the people around you? Did you ever feel this whole gender thing was just sort of wrong?

What are other ways in which you learned about gender as a child? Have the shape and form that gender takes in your life changed over the course of your life? Is there ever a time when you stop being gendered? Would you like to?

These are the kinds of questions we'll explore in our examination of how we learn gender, or what sociologists call *gender socialization*. **Socialization** is a fundamental concept for sociologists in general, and it is defined as the ways in which we learn to become a member of any group, including the large group we call humanity. The process of socialization begins the moment we are born and continues throughout our lives to the end as we constantly learn how to belong successfully to new groups or adjust to changes in the groups to which we already belong. It's not surprising, given the importance of socialization to sociology as a whole, that

gender socialization is a good place to start in our examination of how gender matters in our everyday lives. In looking at gender socialization, we go back to our beginnings, to the moment we were born. But we also consider all the moments since then and throughout a person's life.

There are many theories of exactly how gender socialization occurs, each with its own unique perspective on exactly what gender socialization is and how it happens. Nonetheless, we can formulate a general definition of **gender socialization** as the process through which individuals learn the gender norms of their society and come to develop an internal gender identity. This definition contains two other terms with which we should also become familiar: *gender norms* and *gender identity*. **Gender norms** are the sets of rules for what is appropriate masculine and feminine behavior in a given culture. In sex role theory, discussed in Chapter 2, collections of gender norms are what make up a sex role, a set of expectations about how someone labeled a man or someone labeled a woman should behave. The way in which being feminine or masculine, a woman or a man, becomes an internalized part of the way we think about ourselves is our gender identity.

You might think of gender identity as a way of describing how gender becomes internal—an integral part of who we are, a part that many of us would be reluctant to abandon completely. The concept of gender identity is therefore consistent with an individual approach to gender, focusing on how gender operates from the inside (gender identity) out. Gender socialization begins in all societies from the moment we are born, but in most societies, gender socialization presumes the ability to look at a new infant and assign it a sex category. In contemporary Anglo-European society, this means putting an infant into one of two categories, male or female. But before we discuss different ways of thinking about gender socialization and explore how this process takes place throughout our lives, let's begin with the first step of deciding who's male, who's female, and who's something else entirely.

## SORTING IT ALL OUT: GENDER SOCIALIZATION AND INTERSEX CHILDREN

Thinking about gender socialization involves considering how people began to treat you as a gendered person from the moment you were born. But how would people respond to a baby that is not clearly a boy or a girl? What color would parents use to decorate the baby's room, and what name would they choose? How would they talk about such a baby when gender is built into the very structure of our language (he/she, his/her)? What kinds of toys would relatives and friends give such a baby, and what would this child do when preschool teachers first instructed the children to form two lines, one for boys and one for girls? Which locker room would this child go to?

These may seem like hypothetical questions, but they lie at the core of an ongoing controversy about **intersex** children—individuals who, for a variety of reasons, do not fit into the contemporary Anglo-European model of male and female bodies. These individuals are important to our discussions of gender socialization because they provide us with insight into a good sociological question: How can we tell whether a baby is male or female?

### Genital Tubercles and Ambiguous Genitalia

Let's start with a case from the United States. Here, with our overall affluence and the availability of the latest medical technology, we assume that many couples can tell even before a baby is born whether it's a boy or a girl. In fact, many couples celebrate well before their baby is born with gender reveal parties. But what is it that's really being revealed at these celebrations?

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 4.1

THE PROBLEM WITH GENDER REVEAL PARTIES

You might have read the headlines about how gender reveal parties have gotten out of hand. Two separate gender reveal parties started wildfires that in total burned over 60,000 acres across the Western United States—the first in Arizona in 2017 and the second in California in 2020 (Manji, 2021). At another gender reveal party, a live alligator bit into a watermelon that squirted blue goo to indicate a boy. In Dubai, the tallest skyscraper was rented out for a blue light show. In New Hampshire, 80 pounds of Tannerite was detonated to announce the gender of one couple's unborn son, an explosion that registered on the Richter scale and caused damage to neighbors' homes. Gender reveal parties can be traced back to 2008, when a blogger posted a video of herself cutting into a pink cake to announce the gender of her unborn daughter. Though they're primarily a U.S. phenomenon, the celebrations have spread around the world with increasing popularity. In addition to wildfires and explosions, many activists have pointed out the damage gender reveal parties do by reinforcing binary assumptions about gender and conflating sex with gender. Technically, gender reveal parties aren't revealing the gender of the unborn child. Gender identity is a social phenomenon and no child is born with a gender identity. The daughter of the blogger to whom gender reveal parties can be traced has already begun to violate gender norms of femininity. You may reveal your child to be a boy, but later, he may come out as nonbinary or a trans girl. In fact, half of those in Generation Z, those born after 1997, believe gender labels are outdated (Manji, 2021). It's probably not a coincidence that gender reveal parties emerged just as many people began to question both the binary and the connection between sex and gender. Time will tell if as Generation Z become parents, gender reveal parties will fade in popularity. What do you think explains the popularity of gender reveal parties? What would a better alternative be to celebrate having a child?

What is it doctors and excited parents are looking for in the grainy picture from the ultrasound in which babies often hardly resemble a human, let alone a boy or girl? The presence or absence of a penis. This is the same thing doctors are looking for when a baby is born. If the baby has a penis, clearly, he's a boy. If the baby lacks a penis, clearly, she's a girl (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Case closed, right?

But here's another stupid question. How do you tell the difference between a penis, which we clearly think of as a part of male anatomy, and a clitoris, which is clearly something that only females have? You may think we've really gone off the deep end here, but would you be surprised

to know that doctors and medical researchers have a precise answer to that question? A baby has a penis if their genitalia are longer than 2.5 centimeters. A baby has a clitoris if their genitalia are shorter than 1.0 centimeters. Penises and clitorises develop from the same, undifferentiated organ in embryos, called a **genital tubercle**.

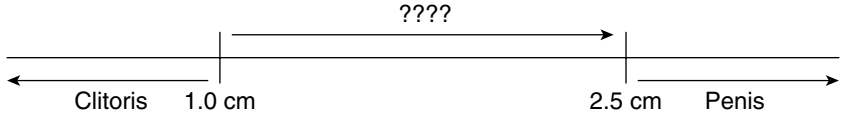
Both organs have a common origin. What's important at birth in places like the United States is the length those organs have reached, and the existence of specific criteria for doctors tells us that the difference between those two organs is not as obvious as we might have initially assumed. And if you're paying attention, you may have noticed that in Figure 4.1, there's an ambiguous space between 1.0 and 2.5 centimeters. What happens to these infants?

External genitalia are one way we believe we can tell the difference between males and females, but when infants are born with ambiguous genitalia, doctors and other medical professionals move on to other markers of biological sex. The length of an infant's clitoris/penis is not the only way in which ambiguous genitalia can occur at birth. Some intersex individuals are born with both a penis (or enlarged clitoris, depending on your point of view) and a vagina.

In all these cases of ambiguous external genitalia, doctors begin to investigate other indicators of biological sex, including the presence or absence of internal sex organs. They look for testes as indicators of maleness and ovaries and a uterus as indicators of femaleness. But this, too, can be a problematic way of determining biological sex. Intersex infants can have a testis (male organ) on one side of their body and an ovary (female organ) on the other side. In other cases, the ovary and testis grow together into one organ that is indistinguishable as either an ovary or a testis and is therefore called an *ovo-testis* (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). In these cases, internal sex organs do not provide any easier an answer to the question of the infant's biological sex than do external anatomy.

In the not-so-distant past, this may have been the scientific and technological limit of our ability to distinguish between males and females. But in a basic biology course, you probably learned that there is also a genetic difference between males and females. Females are marked by a pair of XX chromosomes, while males are marked by XY chromosomes. Genetics, then, should surely be able to solve the problem of determining biological sex. But even at the chromosomal level, things are not so black and white. In general, females are XX and males are XY, but some individuals can be XO, which means they lack a second chromosome (usually a second X chromosome). In the case of Klinefelter's syndrome, individuals have an extra X chromosome, resulting in an XXY pattern. Obviously, these genetic patterns have effects on how other measures of biological sex are expressed, so that those with XO patterns (called Turner syndrome) do not develop ovaries or the secondary sex characteristics (body changes at puberty and menstruation) associated with being female.

**FIGURE 4.1 ■ Criteria for Differentiating Between a Clitoris and a Penis**




*Source:* Adapted from: Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality.* New York: Basic Books.

Those with Klinefelter's syndrome are infertile and often develop breasts at puberty despite having male genitalia. Even at the level of our DNA, there is no simple answer to the question of how to tell whether a baby is male or female.

It's important to note that there are problems with the language we use to describe intersex variations. Describing being intersex as a "syndrome" implies that intersex people are sick or have a disorder of some sort, which is not the case. Being born intersex is a naturally occurring phenomenon and not a disease or disorder. There is nothing pathological about intersex variations. I use "syndrome" for the sake of clarity, but it's important to recognize the problems with this terminology. As Table 4.1 demonstrates, there are a wide variety of ways of being intersex.

**TABLE 4.1 ■ Types and Frequency of Intersex Variations**

| Type | Description | Estimated Frequency |
|---|---|---|
| Non-XX and non-XY | Catch-all for non-XX and non-XY variations, excluding Klinefelter's and Turner's | 1 in 1,666 births |
| Klinefelter (XXY) | Males with an extra X chromosome: small testes, postpuberty ejaculate containing no sperm, various other effects | 1 in 1,000 births |
| Androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) | XY children born with highly feminized genitalia; at puberty children develop breasts and a feminine body shape | 1 in 130,000 births |
| Congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) | In XX children, can cause mild to severe masculinization of genitalia at birth or puberty | 1 in 13,000 births |
| Late-onset CAH | Premature development of pubic hair, irregular menstrual periods, unwanted body hair; in some cases, infertility | 1 in 66 individuals |
| Turner syndrome (XO) | Females lacking a second X chromosome: no ovarian development, short stature, lack of secondary sex characteristics | 1 in 2,777 births |
| Vaginal agenesis | Vagina not fully developed | 1 in 5,000 births |
| Gonadal dysgenesis | Underdeveloped and dysfunctioning gonads; infantile female appearance and infertility | 1 in 150,000 births |
| People whose bodies differ from standard male or female | | 1 in 100 births |
| People receiving surgery to "normalize" genital appearance | | 1 or 2 in 1,000 births |

*Sources:* Adapted from: Intersex Society of North America, "How Common Is Intersex?" http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency; Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2000. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 4.2

### CASTER SEMENYA AND GENDER TESTING IN SPORTS

You may have heard about the recent case of Caster Semenya, a South African runner who was told she would have to take medicine to lower her natural testosterone levels before she could compete in women's events. Semenya is just the latest in a long line of women to have been caught up in the discriminatory and confusing practice of gender testing in sports. How do sports officials go about ensuring that everyone is, in fact, the gender they claim to be? The Olympics began sex testing in 1968 in response to the masculine appearance of some "female" athletes, many of whom were pumped up on steroids (Saner, 2008). These tests involved detailed physical examinations by a series of doctors and were experienced as humiliating and invasive to the female athletes who had to undergo them. The career of hurdler Maria José Martínez-Patiño was derailed in 1986 when testing based on genetic sex revealed she had a Y chromosome (Bardin, 2012). She was subsequently banned from participating in the Olympics. In 2012, the International Olympics Committee instituted a new sex-testing policy based on testosterone levels. Under this system, women with naturally high levels of testosterone, a variation known as hyperandrogenism, would be banned (Jordan-Young & Karkazis, 2012). Though the evidence is mixed, IOC officials claim that higher levels of testosterone, even though they're completely natural, give Caster Semenya a potential competitive advantage.

What about the male athletes? Is their sex category tested? The sex category of male Olympic athletes has never been universally tested or challenged. Why? The presumption is that a biological female competing among biological males would gain no advantage. A woman passing herself off as a man in Olympic competition isn't cheating in the way a man passing himself off as a woman would be. This is true despite the fact that in sports like wrestling and boxing, where competitors are sorted by weight class, there is no advantage that necessarily accrues to men. In long-distance running, women's times have been consistently catching up to men's (Lorber, 1994). Do women really need to be protected from competing with men? Can you imagine a world of sports that is not structured on segregation by gender? Neither horse racing nor race car driving is gender segregated. Why not? Increasing numbers of girls are choosing to wrestle in middle school, high school, and college. Why is wrestling emerging as a sport that doesn't need to be segregated by gender? Little League baseball is often mixed-sex until around puberty, when girls are funneled into softball and boys into baseball. Are there anatomical differences that make it impossible for women to throw or hit a baseball? The case of a 16-year-old girl recently drafted by a professional baseball team in Japan seems to suggest that the answer is probably no ("Girl," 2008). Recently, the first woman tried out for the NFL regional draft as a kicker, and although she didn't make it, the NFL has said there is no specific rule preventing women from playing in the league (Rosenthal, 2013).

You might be thinking at this point, *that's all good and fine*. But how often do any of these things actually happen? How often do doctors have to measure the size of a baby's penis/clitoris, examine his or her internal sex organs, or analyze his or her DNA to determine sex? There are many ways in which individuals can be intersex, as well as debates about exactly what makes someone intersex, and these affect the various estimates of the frequency of intersex people. In

addition, coming up with an exact number for frequency of being intersex is difficult given that methods of reporting and data collection are hampered by the stigma associated with being intersex or having an intersex infant, which creates a tendency for people to hide their status.

Nonetheless, some of the most reliable estimates put the number of infants who are born with an intersex variation that merits some kind of surgery for genital reconstruction at 1 or 2 per 2,000 children (Preves, 2003). If you broaden the category to include not just those who require surgery at birth but also those with chromosomal, gonadal (having to do with internal sex organs), genital, or hormonal intersex features, the prevalence in the population has been estimated to be as high as 2%. Other reports estimate that between 1% and 4% of the population is intersex, and in some populations, inheritable types of intersex variations can be as common as 1 in every 300 births (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

To compare the prevalence of being intersex to the prevalence of other kinds of variations, being born intersex is more common, by most estimates, than albinism (people who lack any pigment in the hair or skin; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Being born intersex occurs about as often as cystic fibrosis and Down syndrome, two variations that are more familiar to most of us and certainly cause considerably less shame for parents and family members (Preves, 2003). If you go with an estimate as high as 4% of the population, being intersex in all its forms would be as common as having red hair. Intersex individuals have occurred throughout history and across societies. Even though many people may consider intersex individuals to be abnormal, they are not *unnatural* any more than any other babies born with any other trait are unnatural; being intersex can be an inheritable trait, and it appears with some frequency in the human population. The existence of intersex people is only unnatural if you believe that the existence of only two biological sexes *is* natural.

## What Can We Learn From the Stories of Intersex People?

It is this point that makes the case of intersex individuals important and interesting to our general discussion of gender, sex category, and gender socialization. Many of those who study gender wonder why, given the existence of a rather large group of people who do not fit into the categories of male or female, we don't change the categories or acknowledge that maybe the categories don't work. If people are frequently born who are not really either male or female according to any of the biological criteria that we believe determine whether you're male or female, then are the categories of male and female really natural after all? This should sound familiar as a strong social constructionist approach to sexual dimorphism. The strong social constructionist approach posits that gender is what leads to the notion of sex. It is our belief in fundamental differences between women and men that leads us to believe there are two distinct biological categories called male and female. We stick to this notion even when the evidence of intersex individuals contradicts that reality.

A good example of how you might argue that this works from a strong social constructionist perspective is the criteria for penis/clitoris length we discussed previously. Why did doctors decide that 2.5 centimeters is the crucial length at which this genital organ becomes a penis? What biological imperative makes 2.5 centimeters such an important length? Two considerations make 2.5 an important number for doctors. First, doctors believe a penis/clitoris any

shorter than 2.5 centimeters prevents little boys from peeing standing up. It doesn't interfere with their ability to rid their bodies of urine, which would be a fairly pressing medical and biological problem. Doctors feel 2.5 centimeters is an important cutoff because otherwise boys are not able to participate in the important *social* experience of peeing standing up with other little boys. The length is about avoiding that social stigma, even though there is no biological or medical reason men need to stand up to pee or reason why men should have to pee standing up. In fact, both males and females can pee standing up, although Western toilets make this more difficult for people without penises.

The second consideration used to explain the 2.5-centimeter criterion is the ability of intersex infants to use their penis/clitoris to have penetrative vaginal intercourse with a woman (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). This consideration exists despite the fact that some individuals, intersex or not, have had successful sexual experiences with vaginal intercourse, including fathering a child in one instance, with penises shorter than 2.5 centimeters (Reilly & Woodhouse, 1989). This second consideration is also fundamentally *social* rather than based on any biological imperative. It assumes that to be a normal male, you must be heterosexual and, therefore, need to be able to have sex (and a very specific kind of sex) with a woman. It also assumes that all heterosexual men need to be able to have penetrative sex with a woman. What about men who choose to be celibate? What about men who enjoy other forms of sexual activity, with other men or women, that do not involve vaginal penetration?

These criteria being used to determine what is supposedly a biological category reflect our deeply held social assumptions about the differences between women and men. In other words, the criteria reflect our assumptions about *gender*, and so in this specific instance, gendered ideas about what is important to masculine behavior inform our understanding of "biological" categories of *sex*. As the strong social constructionists would say, our gendered views of the world make us try to impose sex categories on a much more complex reality; gender creates sex.

Another argument in this vein points to the ways in which doctors in contemporary Anglo-European societies focus solely on the functionality of a male penis as opposed to other criteria from other time periods and cultures. During the late 19th century, when gender ideas were different, biological sex among the sexually ambiguous was also determined differently. The presence or absence of ovaries was the crucial litmus test for sex assignment rather than the size of any external organ (Lorber, 1994). This was because the gender views of this time told them that a woman is only a woman if she can procreate. In our more scientific world today, no consideration is given to the presence of ovaries or the status of an intersex infant's vagina and its suitability for penetrative intercourse. What might this reveal about our own assumptions about what makes males and females?

Why is this discussion of genitalia and genetics an important starting place for a larger discussion of gender socialization? The study of intersex individuals is often at the crossroads of debates about the relative importance of nature versus nurture in determining what we think of as gender. The current status quo among doctors and the medical profession regarding intersex infants is to pick a sex and perform surgery and other medical interventions to bring the baby's gender into line with the chosen sex. So if an infant has a vagina and an oversized clitoris/penis, her clitoris will be surgically shortened, and she will be raised as a female. The goal is not to

preserve reproductive ability or physical sensation but to take the path that creates the maximum potential for normal-looking genitalia. Because a functional and cosmetically appropriate penis is more difficult to construct surgically, many intersex individuals become females.

In many of these cases, repeated surgeries may be necessary over the course of the individual's life, and sometimes, individuals take hormones to induce appropriate secondary sex characteristics when they reach puberty. An intersex individual who is being raised as a male and develops breasts at puberty might be given testosterone to correct this problem. Sometimes testes, ovaries, or ovo-testes are surgically removed. We'll talk about the repercussions for the development of the intersex person in more detail later, but the process of creating a sex for an intersex individual can be fairly involved, time-consuming, and painful. But the standard medical protocol for dealing with intersex infants in the United States assumes that nurture (how a child is raised) can trump nature (the complexities of the sexual biology with which they may have been born).

This debate about the relative weights of nature versus nurture is an old one, and it's big enough for its own textbook. What the case of intersex people teaches us is that there's a great deal of biological diversity out there that doesn't fit into the prescribed sex categories of Anglo-European society. We also know that there's a great deal of variety in how individual people and societies form the connections between sex category, gender, and sexual orientation. Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993) proposed five sexes instead of two. The five sexes would be male, male hermaphrodite (merm), true hermaphrodite, female hermaphrodite (ferm), and female.

More recently, Fausto-Sterling (2015) revisited her five-sex formulation and suggested that we should acknowledge that sexual identities and characteristics come in a wider assortment than mere genitals can distinguish. Following the International Bill of Gender Rights adopted at the fourth annual International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy, she suggests that we should all have the right to choose our own gender, regardless of the configuration of our physical bodies. In essence, we should be able to make up our own categories, or not, as we see fit.

## "Normal" Gender Socialization

The process of gender socialization generally begins with an infant being labeled either male or female, even if that label might turn out to be wrong. Although we imagine the identification of the sex of a baby as a fairly normal and unproblematic event, we've seen that that is not always the case. This teaches us important lessons about the connections between gender and sex category, but it also helps us with an important lesson we'll be emphasizing throughout this book. In telling a story about gender socialization, it is tempting to begin with the "typical" or "normal" story of gender socialization and then to demonstrate all the ways in which one might deviate from that typical story.

But what would that typical story look like? Is the most typical story of gender socialization about a girl or a boy? What about socialization for *gender nonconforming* children, or those whose behavior, appearance, or identity doesn't conform to prevailing cultural expectations

about what their gender should be? Would a "typical" story of gender socialization result in a heterosexual individual? From the beginnings of research into what we now call homosexuality, scholars explored the idea that this behavior resulted from some kind of basic failure of gender socialization. Would the typical story of gender socialization be that of a white, middle-class child in the global North, even though being either white, middle class, or in the global North puts you in a numerical minority globally? (Most of the world's population is not white, middle class, or living in the global North.)

Would the typical story of gender socialization be about an intersex individual? You could argue for the typicality of intersex individuals' stories of socialization because they reveal in obvious ways what is implicit in the gender socialization stories of all of us. Our sex and gender don't always line up in the ways perfectly predicted by a "typical" story of gender socialization. Some of us who consider ourselves women pursue masculine careers. Some of us who consider ourselves men relate to other people in ways that are considered more feminine.

The experiences of intersex people helps us see gender socialization for what it is—a complex, fragile, always incomplete, and less-than-perfect process. There is no typical story of gender socialization, and so after giving an overview of some basic theories of socialization, we'll focus on stories of socialization selected not for their typicality or nontypicality but for the ways in which they help us to ask some interesting questions about this complicated, lifelong process of learning gender.

## SOME THEORIES OF GENDER SOCIALIZATION

Theories of gender socialization can be understood at the individual level because they explain the ways in which gender comes to be internalized by individuals. But it's important to remember that gender becomes internalized through our interactions with those around us. In sociological vocabulary, the person being socialized is the **target of socialization**. The people, groups, and institutions doing the socializing are the **agents of socialization**. Although the theories we discuss conceive of that interaction in different ways and suggest different roles for the target of socialization, they all agree that interaction with our society is the central mechanism through which socialization takes place. So gender socialization can also be examined at an interactional level.

What about institutions? Note that in the definition of agents of socialization, we included not just other individuals but also groups and institutions. Institutions such as the family, school, and religion play important roles in the process of gender socialization. The role of the media as an institution is becoming increasingly important in contemporary gender socialization. Understanding gender socialization should then employ all three of these levels at which gender operates. As you read about the following theories, think about the extent to which they examine the process of gender socialization at all three levels.

### Social Learning Theory

**Social learning theory** developed in psychology from the legacy of behaviorism. You might be familiar with behaviorism as associated with B. F. Skinner and the ability to shape the behavior

of rats based on a system of punishments and rewards. Behaviorism claimed that behavior in humans is learned, so behaviorists were interested in discovering exactly *how* we learn those behaviors. Their primary answer is that, like rats, we learn through a process of rewards and punishments, or through a carrot-and-stick approach. When an infant smiles at his parent for the first time, he receives rewards in the form of verbal praise, attention, and affection. The behavior is rewarded, and chances are the baby will try smiling again in the near future. When a toddler knocks her plate of food off the table, she may or may not get scolded, but at the very least, she *doesn't* get verbal praise and affection. According to social learning theory, this is basically how we learn—through the selective rewarding of, withholding of rewards for, or punishing of behavior.

### Sex-Typed Behaviors

It's fairly easy to see how these ideas apply to the process of gender socialization. Social learning theorists identified specific **sex-typed behaviors** (Mischel, 1970). A behavior is sex-typed when it is more expected and therefore perceived as appropriate when performed by one sex but less expected and therefore perceived as inappropriate when performed by the other sex. Making a list of sex-typed behaviors results in the articulation of a gender or sex role, which we've already discussed, so sex-typed behaviors are also similar to the concept of gender norms.

The idea of sex-typed behaviors adds the notion, not necessarily contained in the concept of gender norms, that we purposefully categorize behaviors as appropriate to one sex but not to the other. Gender socialization works, according to social learning theorists, by rewarding children for engaging in sex-typed behavior consistent with their assigned sex category. The classic example is crying; while a little girl may be soothed when she cries, a little boy may be told that boys don't cry. Crying is a sex-typed behavior, considered OK for girls and therefore not a punishable behavior for them. But because it is not considered an appropriate behavior for boys, the little boy may be punished or corrected for his crying behavior. Through these kinds of interactions, gender socialization occurs.

This original formulation of social learning theory described a somewhat conspiratorial role for the agents of socialization, people like parents, teachers, and friends. This is because social learning theory implies a conscious effort to reward and punish sex-typed behavior differentially. It calls to mind images of mothers and fathers developing careful plans for the behaviors that will be rewarded and punished in their sons and daughters. In reality, few parents ever sit down and make these kinds of intentional decisions. Social learning theorists subsequently added to their original formulation and said that conscious intent on the part of agents of socialization was not necessary to the process (Bandura, 1963). Latent learning can take place as a result of the way children tend to imitate those around them, regardless of whether they will be rewarded for that imitation.

## Cognitive-Development Theory

Behaviorism faded in importance within psychology during the middle of the 20th century (Siann, 1994). The specific area in psychology dealing with socialization came under the influence of the Swiss theorist Jean Piaget. Piaget (1954) directly contradicted social learning theory

by emphasizing children's active role in their own socialization rather than considering them to be passive recipients of socialization. In addition, Piaget brought to the psychological study of socialization an emphasis on the stages of children's cognitive development. This was a radical approach to child development because it implied that children are not "little adults" but fundamentally different in the way they think, feel, and understand the world around them.

Lawrence Kohlberg (1966) used Piaget's models of child development to create a new psychological theory of gender socialization, commonly called **cognitive-development theory**. This theory explains the ways in which children acquire a sense of gender identity and the ability to gender-type themselves and others. We've already discussed gender identity as the internalized sense of your gender. Gender-typing is another term for sex-typing, for identifying behaviors perceived as appropriate for one sex or gender but not the other. Children acquire gender identity and learn to gender-type as they progress through a series of discrete, fixed developmental stages. The emphasis throughout is on how children actively develop an understanding of gender and then, based on that understanding, actively socialize themselves rather than being passive objects of socialization.

## Stages of Gender Socialization

The first stage in this model happens between the ages of 2½ and 3 when children acquire a gender identity. Children of this age should be able to identify their own gender as well as identify the gender of others around them. If you've been around small children, you may have noticed that we're certainly not born with the ability to distinguish gender—it's something that has to be learned. A 2-year-old may point to people on TV or, sometimes more embarrassingly (although it's interesting to think about why it's embarrassing when a child cannot correctly identify someone's gender), a friend or relative and ask, "Is he a boy or a girl?" By the age of 5, children have acquired gender stability, according to cognitive-development theory. With **gender stability**, children know that their society sees their gender as permanent and that the gender they are born with should be their gender for the rest of their lives. The lives of transgender people tell us that this is not necessarily true, but with gender stability, children internalize this as a general rule.

It's not until the age of 7, according to cognitive-development theory, that children reach the final phase of gender understanding: gender constancy. With gender constancy, children develop the complicated understanding that even a male wearing a dress, a wig, or makeup is still fundamentally a male. **Gender constancy** brings an understanding that even changing the outward physical appearance of a person does not change his or her underlying sex category. Up until this stage, children's understanding of gender is still limited and based on concrete rules (e.g., girls have long hair and boys have beards; Siann, 1994).

Although the process of gender socialization for cognitive developmentalists begins when children develop a gender identity, actual gender-typing does not begin until children achieve gender constancy at age 7. At that point, children actively begin to select from their environment the behaviors they consider consistent with their gender identity. The basic idea is that

once a little girl begins to perceive herself and others as gendered, she will be self-motivated to engage in feminine behaviors and to model herself on the other people she identifies as women in her environment. This is driven in part by children's need for cognitive consistency; if children know what their gender is, then what they do and think should line up with that gender (Bem, 1983). Children work to achieve **gender congruency** and, in the process, achieve gender socialization.

Children do not become fully sex-typed until they have achieved the final stage of gender constancy at around age 7. Cognitive-development theory does not completely dismiss the importance of the external environment or of society itself. Society obviously provides the material from which children pick and choose to achieve gender congruency. But it does locate much more of the power in the process of socialization with the targets (children) rather than with the agents of socialization.

Both social learning theory and cognitive-development theory largely predate the broad influence of second-wave feminism on academic disciplines like psychology. Both are general theories of socialization that can be applied to the specific question of gender socialization. Given that these theories developed before feminists' entrance into psychology, it's probably not surprising that one of the critiques of cognitive-development theory is its male bias. Kohlberg (1966) focused his theory mostly on the case of young boys, and you can see how the theory can work better for little boys than little girls.

Within this theoretical perspective, children are self-motivated to gender themselves and have little need for external pressure. It makes sense in a male-dominated world that boys would be motivated to adopt a masculine gender identity. Being masculine brings with it power and privilege. But if children are savvy enough to work on developing gender congruency, they're probably also smart enough to work out that being feminine is not quite as valued in our society as being masculine. Cognitive-development theory had difficulty explaining this differential dynamic between little girls and little boys. Other critiques based in empirical research point out that children begin to demonstrate preferences for objects and activities based on gender by the age of 3 (Unger & Crawford, 1992). This contradicts the predictions of cognitive-development theory that children will not begin to engage in gender-typing until gender constancy is achieved at age 7. If you've been around children younger than age 7, you might have noticed that as a group, they're fairly invested in gender.

We can add to these critiques the difficulty of cognitive-development theory for dealing with the case of transgender and other gender-nonconforming children. If children are self-motivated to line up their gender identity with the messages society sends them about that gender, how do we make sense of the experiences of transgender children, many of whom express their gender identities at the age of 5 or younger? In addition, the ideas of gender constancy and gender stability are beliefs about how gender works that do not reflect the more complicated reality. This means cognitive development theory is based on children absorbing a made-up and false system of beliefs about how gender works. Their "development" is measured by the extent to which they've been indoctrinated into believing that their gender cannot change, even though we know this isn't true.

## Gender Schema Theory

The next two theories emerged from the increasing influence of feminism in psychology and of feminist psychologists bringing their own perspective to the topic of gender socialization. The first is **gender schema theory**, which builds on the frameworks of both cognitive-development and social learning theory to formulate an explanation specific to gender socialization rather than to socialization as a more general process. This theory was developed by Sandra Bem, and one of her critiques of cognitive-development theory was that it provided no explanation for why children socialized themselves based on gender as a category in particular. Bem (1983, 1993) questioned why gender became the important organizing principle around which children built their identities rather than other readily available categories such as race, religion, or even eye color.

Bem called this the "Why gender?" question; why is it that gender becomes such an important difference in the lives of very young children? Because the theory of cognitive development does not provide an answer or address these other categories of difference, Bem (1983) argued that there's a presumption that gender differences are "naturally and inevitably" (p. 602) more important to children than other differences. This is connected to a more general problem with cognitive-development theory; the theory errs too far on the side of privileging individual behavior and decisions. As Bem (1983) noted, in cognitive-development theory, children seem, in large part, to socialize themselves in the "absence of any external pressure to behave in a sex-stereotyped manner" (p. 601). Gender schema theory seeks to correct this swing away from the external pressures important to social learning theory by finding a balance between the two.

### What Is a Schema?

How does gender schema theory find this balance? As the name of the theory suggests, it begins with the concept of schemas. A **schema** is a cognitive structure and network of associations that helps to organize an individual's perception of the world (Bem, 1983). According to gender schema theory, schemas help us organize incoming information and perceptions from the outside world; they serve a sorting and organizing function. More importantly, they shape the way we look for and experience information as well as what kind of information we integrate into our way of thinking. In this sense, schemas are more than just a system of organization, like a file folder that exists inside our head. Schemas also include the complicated ways in which the files are interconnected, as the file for *mother* is probably also connected to *female, woman, feminine, nurturer, caretaker*, and so on. The existence of this schema then shapes the way in which we perceive the world around us; if our schema about mothers is made up of all these characteristics, we might pay more attention to the mothers we see who line up with all these other qualities while becoming less likely to perceive the mothers who do not.

Schemas are ways of organizing information, but they also become, as Bem (1993) pointed out, lenses that shape the way in which we see the world. A **gender schema**, then, is a cognitive structure that enables us to sort characteristics and behaviors into masculine and feminine categories and then creates various other associations with those categories. Like schemas more generally, gender schemas also eventually come to shape the ways in which we perceive the

world around us, through the lenses of gender. Gender schema theory poses that rather than rose-colored glasses, we all live with gendered-colored glasses that lead us to see the world in specifically gendered ways.

Socialization occurs as children assimilate their self-concept, the way they think about themselves, to their gender schema (Bem, 1983; C. Martin et al., 2002). Children learn the content of their particular society's gender schema, or the network of associations around the characteristics of masculine and feminine. When they begin to think of themselves as masculine or feminine, that particular gender schema is also associated with their sense of identity. They learn that when they are picking behaviors and ways of thinking to assimilate into their own sense of selves, they should limit themselves to the particular subset of behaviors and attitudes appropriate to their own gender. As in cognitive-development theory, children are motivated to socialize themselves—but now through the mechanism of gender schemas.

## Characteristics of Gender Schemas

Gender in particular becomes an important organizing category because it is considered by almost all cultures to be functionally important to society. Gender schemas exist because cultures are structured in such a way as to convince us that society cannot function without the existence of sex and gender categories. Because of the importance placed on gender by most cultures, a broad set of associations between the categories masculine and feminine and many other attributes, behaviors, and categories comes to exist. In other words, gender pervades the way we think about the world and crosscuts many other categories. The importance of gender schemas may be malleable, shifting across different contexts, but they remain important tools for making sense of the world (Dailey & Rosenzweig, 1988; Miller et al., 1997; Uchronski, 2008). An example Bem (1983) provided was that people are perfectly and consistently capable in experiments of sorting seemingly gender-neutral terms and objects into masculine and feminine categories. In experiments, people will spontaneously sort *tender* and *nightingale* as feminine and *assertive* and *eagle* as masculine, despite the fact that these terms have no clearly gendered content. Gender schemas are particularly important, then, because culture creates and enforces that importance.

In later work, Bem (1993) outlined some of the specific content of gender schemas as they existed in Anglo-European societies at the time, including a history of their cultural evolution. She identified *androcentrism* and *gender polarization* as two important lenses that shape the way we see and understand gender in many parts of the global North. **Androcentrism** is the belief that masculinity and what men do in our culture is superior to femininity and what women do. Femininity and all it entails are considered deviations from the universal standard of masculinity.

Bem traced a long history of androcentrism in Anglo-European culture, some examples of which are already familiar to us. Freud's theory of gender development is a good example, where having a penis was perceived as the norm, and women's development was perceived as inferior and abnormal as a result of women's lack of a penis. Androcentrism is also a useful concept for explaining the many ways in which it is sometimes more acceptable for women to engage in masculine behavior than it is for men to engage in feminine behavior. In the United States, most men will get a lot more flack for wearing a skirt or makeup than a woman will receive for wearing

men's pants or a man's hat. We will see in the next section how psychoanalytic theory, another theory of gender socialization, has a different explanation for the same types of behaviors.

**Gender polarization**, the second important part of how we perceive gender in Anglo-European society, describes the way in which behaviors and attitudes viewed as appropriate for men are viewed as inappropriate for women and vice versa. Bem (1993) argued that gender polarization operates in two ways. First, it creates two mutually exclusive scripts for being feminine and being masculine. This means that the script appropriate for men is only ever appropriate for men, and no script can ever be appropriate for both men and women. Second, gender polarization problematizes any person who deviates from these mutually exclusive scripts as unnatural, immoral, abnormal, or pathological, depending on the particular system of thought being used.

Gender polarization is an important way in which the strong link among sex (as biology), gender, and sexuality is maintained. To be a woman is to be heterosexual and to be attracted to men, and so lesbian women would be an example of people considered to be unnatural, immoral, abnormal, or pathological as a result of gender polarization. In his later work on the lenses of androcentrism and gender polarization, Bem focused even more attention on the question of **enculturation**, or on how culture comes to reside inside individuals. This shift in gender schema theory brings us back to a balance between the importance of external agents of socialization and active targets shaping their own process of learning gender through the mechanism of gender schemas.

Gender schema theory raises interesting questions about what happens to gender socialization as gender schema change over time. With the increasing visibility of transgender and gender nonconforming people, could gender polarization as a schema be fading? As the binary loses power, how might different gender schema emerge that move beyond femininity and masculinity?

## Psychoanalytic Theory

The final theory of gender socialization we explore also draws on psychology as a discipline but on a very different kind of psychology. Nancy Chodorow (1978) laid out her perspective on gender socialization in her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*, and you should be able to guess from the title where she locates her explanation for women's universal subordination. Like gender schema theory, psychoanalytic theory is an explanation specific to the process of gender socialization rather than beginning as an exploration of the process of socialization more generally. Rather than drawing on cognitive or behaviorist theory, Chodorow began with Freud's legacy of psychoanalysis as important to explaining the key causal factor in women's subordinate position: their status as mothers.

**Psychoanalytic theory** begins with the importance of women's status as mothers and uses principles from Freud and others in the psychoanalytic tradition to explain the ways in which gender becomes deeply embedded in the psychic structure of our personalities. Thus, psychoanalytic theory differs from other theories of gender socialization in which gender is a behavioral acquisition, something children pick up in the process of socialization. For psychoanalysts,

gender is something that becomes deeply embedded in our personality structures very early in our development in ways that other theories of gender socialization do not adequately describe.

To understand exactly how this happens, it is necessary to understand a few concepts essential to psychoanalytic theory. **Psychoanalytic identification** is the way in which a child modifies her own sense of self to incorporate some ability, attribute, or power she sees in others around her (usually a parent). When a child is developing a sense of right and wrong, he does not merely internalize a miniature version of the parent who tells him what is right and wrong. Rather, in identification, that ability to distinguish between right and wrong becomes a part of the child's own sense of self; it becomes a sense of inner regulation for the child.

The other important concept is that of **ego boundaries**, another term borrowed from Freud, which describes the sense of personal psychological division between ourselves and the world around us. Ego boundaries are what help us figure out where the stuff called "me" stops and everything else begins. This may seem pretty self-evident, but from a psychoanalytic perspective, it's not as simple as it might seem. We're not born with ego boundaries; they are something we learn and develop in early childhood (Chodorow, 1978).

In her formulation of psychoanalytic theory, Chodorow (1978) maintained many of the basic ideas of Freudian theory, including the Oedipal complex. But the result of these processes is different; rather than focusing on the attainment of gender identity and heterosexuality, Chodorow's take on psychoanalytic theory is interested in the "relational potential" produced in people of different genders (p. 166). Identification occurs for both boys and girls with their mothers initially, as a result of the complete dependence of the infant on the mother as primary caregiver. In this early phase of our development, occurring beyond our ability to remember consciously as adults, we have no sense of ego boundaries between ourselves and our mothers. According to psychoanalytic theory, infants at this stage do not experience themselves as separate from their mothers.

Eventually, though, infants come to see that although they completely depend on their mother for their survival, the reverse is not true; even the most dedicated of mothers has other concerns beyond her infant, and psychoanalytic theory focuses on how boys and girls resolve the tensions caused by this realization. In other words, if Mom has concerns that are not consistent with my own, Mom must actually be separate from me. The process is qualitatively different for boys and girls, which gives us radically different personality structures for men and women as adults.

### The Gender of Ego Boundaries

Chodorow assumes that girl children share the same gender with their mothers, even though the case of trans men and nonbinary people giving birth to children contradicts this assumption. Because of this presumed similarity, girls can experience a sense of connection with their mothers for longer than boy infants. This is because, conveniently enough, the gender identity they need to learn is available to them much more readily than it is to boys; girls can develop a sense of gender identity through their direct personal relationship with their mothers.

In addition, Chodorow (1978) argued that because mothers themselves have already internalized a sense of gender identity, they experience their infant daughters as more similar to them than their infant sons. On some unconscious level, mothers then push their sons away in ways they do not push their daughters. As a result of these early psychological dynamics, girls emerge with a personality structure characterized by empathy and with less of an ability to differentiate themselves from others. Feminine personality structure has less developed ego boundaries.

Boy infants have the task before them of acquiring a masculine gender identity, despite the fact that their primary identification is with their mother, who may represent feminine gender identity. How do boys acquire this masculine identity in the absence of an initial masculine identification? According to Chodorow, this is a problematic dynamic for masculine development, as boys learn masculinity in the absence of an ongoing relationship with a man. In addition, to become masculine, boys must sever their sense of connection to and identification with their mothers.

As a result of these underlying dynamics, the masculine personality structure emerges with a much more well-developed sense of their separation from others. Men have stronger ego boundaries than do women. Masculinity is learned by boys in part as a rejection of what is feminine, including their identification with their mother. In the absence of this kind of strong relationship with other men, masculinity is learned by boys through the use of cultural stereotypes rather than through the kind of direct observation that girls experience with their mothers. This results in two important features of masculine gender identity: It is less stable than feminine gender identity, and it contains, as a basic element, a devaluation of all things feminine.

There are two important features to highlight about psychoanalytic theory. First, it explains not just how gender socialization occurs but also how the same process of gender socialization recreates itself across generations. Girls who emerge from this developmental process more empathetic and with less of a sense of ego boundaries are predisposed to seek out the kind of nurturing involved in mothering, therefore reproducing the same personality structure in their children. These processes of gender development don't just produce generic gender differences; they also produce a new generation of women whose personalities lead them to want to mother and, therefore, to reproduce again in their own sons and daughters the same inevitable process.

In Chapter 8, we discuss the persistence of women's roles as primary caregivers to children, even in families who consciously attempt a more equitable division of labor. Chodorow's (1978) theory helps explain this persistence because the desire to mother is a fundamental part of feminine personalities. The second feature to note in psychoanalytic theory is that it helps to explain the subordination of women through the development of the masculine personality (Kimmel, 2009). Masculinity has a devaluation of women and therefore of the feminine built into its very structure. This neatly explains why women seem to be universally subordinate to men. Considering women to be inferior is an essential part of what it means to be masculine, according to identification theory.

Table 4.2 helps break down the theories of gender socialization we've discussed so far.

Psychoanalytic theory has had widespread influence and has inspired many studies to explore these dimensions of masculine and feminine personality (Belenky et al., 1997; Gilligan, 1982; Kimmel, 2009; Pascoe, 2011; Williams, 1991). Carol Gilligan (1982) used identification

**TABLE 4.2 ■ Theories of Gender Socialization**

| Theory | Gender Specific? |
|---|---|
| Social learning theory | No |
| Cognitive-development theory | No |
| Gender schema theory | Yes |
| Psychoanalytic theory | Yes |

theory to argue for a uniquely feminine approach to issues of justice and morality. You might remember from our earlier discussion of Freud that Freud predicted women would have a much less developed sense of justice and morality. Gilligan used identification theory to argue that women's morality is structured by the fact that they experience less of a sense of separation between themselves and others in their environment. So although traditional ideas of justice assume that right and wrong must be determined by an objective devaluation of empathy and compassion, a more feminine sense of justice is deeply entwined with the idea of being able to take the position of others. Masculine ideas of justice are blind and assume that one can determine what is just only by ignoring the particulars of a person's situation. Feminine justice assumes that the unique set of particulars must be considered. Other studies have used psychoanalytic theory to explain the experiences of men in predominately female occupations, the attraction of young boys to sports, and gender differences in how women and men learn (Belenky et al., 1997; Messner, 1990; Williams, 1991).

Psychoanalytic theory is a good example of the unique perspective feminist theory can bring to preexisting and gender-biased modes of thinking. Both feminine and masculine personalities have their difficulties, but psychoanalytic theory reverses the tendency of Freudian theory to normalize masculinity while problematizing femininity. But by drawing on Freud and psychoanalysis as a model, psychoanalytic theory is subject to some of the same critiques. In psychoanalytic theory, most of the important events of gender socialization happen at an early age, resulting in a relatively fixed gender identity by the time one is about 2 to 3 years of age. In addition, the theory fails to explain how the development of gender identity changes in situations in which women are not responsible for primary childcare. Like cognitive development theory and social learning theory, psychoanalytic theory leans heavily on binary notions of gender.

## THE EARLY YEARS: PRIMARY SOCIALIZATION INTO GENDER

Now that we have a familiarity with some of the more important theories of how gender socialization *should* happen, we can begin to explore accounts of how gender socialization actually *does* happen in a variety of settings. We'll start at the beginning with what sociologists call *primary socialization*. **Primary socialization** is the initial process of learning the ways of a society or group that occurs in infancy and childhood and is transmitted through the primary groups to which we belong. **Primary groups** are characterized by intimate, enduring, unspecialized relationships among small groups who generally spend a great deal of time together (Cooley, 1909/1963).

This definition should sound like what most people understand a family to be, although other groups, such as childhood friends, can also make up a primary group. If you took a piece of paper and drew a ring of concentric circles around yourself that represented increasing levels of intimacy and importance to you in your life, the innermost circle would be your primary group. All the theories we have discussed deal with primary socialization, and this includes a focus on what happens early in our lives in the specific environment of our families.

## Primary Socialization

Primary socialization begins before a baby is even born, because we're born into societies with certain assumptions about gender that existed long before we came along. Important to newborns' socialization is the relative value placed on either gender in society. In many societies around the world, more value is placed on male infants than on female infants (DeLoache & Gottlieb, 2000). In many cultures, the family name can be carried on only by sons because daughters take on their husband's name when they marry. Sons may be responsible for taking care of elderly parents or for rituals important to family and religious life. For example, in the Hindu religious tradition, important rituals surrounding the death of a parent should be carried out by a son, including proper preparation of the body for cremation.

The reasons for this preference for boys vary, but it has important impacts on the gender socialization of boys and girls. The United Nations has estimated that countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Algeria, Bangladesh, and Egypt have higher-than-expected rates of female infant mortality, which may reflect gender discrimination against daughters (United Nations Statistics Division, 2015). Historically, in these countries, daughters survived at much lower rates than sons because parents fed the girls less, sometimes left them exposed to the elements, and generally neglected their girl children. In a moment, we'll explore some more subtle examples of gender socialization, but if you can imagine being a girl in one of these societies, what would be the end product of this type of gender socialization?

Boys are not considered more desirable in every society across the globe. The Mukogodo people of Kenya place more value on female infants because of the importance of bride wealth that a girl child can bring to the family (Cronk, 1993). The hunting activities of male Mukogodo are also stigmatized in comparison with the farming activities of surrounding tribes. Because of the advantages girl children bring to the family relative to boy children, the Mukogodo women breastfeed their daughters longer and take them to receive medical care more often.

There are also historical variations in the extent to which Americans valued girls and boys. In the rural 1800s, boys were considered more valuable than girls because of their assumed ability to contribute to farm work. But in urban areas of the same time period, girls were considered more valuable because they could work in factory jobs and contribute to the family's income (Coltrane, 1998). In cultures like these two, the experience of gender socialization for girls would be very different from the experience of girls in cultures with a preference for boys.

This is the first point for us to realize about gender socialization. The way gender socialization takes place and the particular form of gender that children learn is deeply tied to the type of culture in which they find themselves. The relative value placed on boys and girls is just one piece of that picture. As psychoanalytic theory indicates, the structure of family life is also

important to the form of gender socialization. Are children raised in a multigenerational family in urban India, with three generations of a family often living together in one apartment? Or are they brought up in a single-parent household?

Within different family structures, the way childcare and other duties are distributed is also important to the process of gender socialization. Who is primarily responsible for taking care of children in a society? How much importance is placed on the task of caring for children relative to other activities in the society? What other kinds of duties does the person primarily responsible for childcare have, and how compatible are those other duties with the task of caring for a child? If we start with just this basic set of questions that have to do with socialization that happens within family structures, it should already be obvious that the social context matters. Let's begin with the specific case of gender socialization in one setting to explore some of these questions about the social and cultural context of gender socialization.

## Gender-Neutral Preschools in Sweden

The family is one important source of primary socialization. In many countries, what happens in preschool also has a role to play. In fact, part of the purpose of preschools is explicitly to provide socialization to young children, preparing them for their future roles as students. A famous book and documentary, *Preschool in Three Cultures*, demonstrates how the daily experiences of young children in China, Japan, and the United States are very different due to sometimes contradictory cultural values. For example, Japanese society emphasizes the importance of learning to work in groups, so large class sizes are not seen as problematic as they are in U.S. preschools (Tobin et al., 1991).

Focusing on the role of preschools in gender socialization is consistent with the top-down approach of social learning theory. Literally, the ones on the top (the taller people) are primarily responsible for imparting gender to those on the bottom, the shorter humans we call *children*. From this top-down perspective, parents, preschool teachers, and other adults in a child's life matter a great deal for gender socialization. Adults take an active role in shaping the way children think about and internalize gender. Taking this top-down approach, Sweden's emphasis on gender equality provides an interesting case.

Gender equality has consistently been an important value in Swedish society. Sweden has remained in the top five globally of countries with the most gender equality for 20 years, coming in fifth behind Iceland, Finland, Norway, and New Zealand in 2021 (World Economic Forum, 2021). For comparison, the United States ranks at 30. Sweden has the highest proportion of women in the workplace in the world, with standard parental leave set at 480 days. Sixty out of those 480 days are set aside specifically for men to encourage them to participate as fully in parenting as possible. A Swedish children's clothing company removed the separate "boys" and "girls" sections in its store at a time when parenting blogs discuss how to dress children in gender-neutral ways (Rothschild, 2012).

Table 4.3 gives us a comparative look at the global gender gap scores for the top 50 countries.

The Swedish experiment with gender-neutral preschools began in 1996 with Ingemar Gens, a journalist who had dabbled in anthropology and gender studies. Gens was appointed "equal opportunity expert" for his district and wanted to break down the norm of stoic, unemotional

**TABLE 4.3 ■ 2021 Global Gender Gap Scores, Top 50 Countries**

| Country | Gender Gap Score |
|---|---|
| **1.** Iceland | .892 |
| **2.** Finland | .861 |
| **3.** Norway | .849 |
| **4.** New Zealand | .840 |
| **5.** Sweden | .823 |
| **6.** Namibia | .809 |
| **7.** Rwanda | .805 |
| **8.** Lithuania | .804 |
| **9.** Ireland | .800 |
| **10.** Switzerland | .798 |
| **11.** Germany | .796 |
| **12.** Nicaragua | .796 |
| **13.** Belgium | .789 |
| **14.** Spain | .788 |
| **15.** Costa Rica | .786 |
| **16.** France | .784 |
| **17.** Philippines | .784 |
| **18.** South Africa | .781 |
| **19.** Serbia | .780 |
| **20.** Latvia | .778 |
| **21.** Austria | .777 |
| **22.** Portugal | .775 |
| **23.** United Kingdom | .775 |
| **24.** Canada | .772 |
| **25.** Albania | .770 |
| **26.** Burundi | .769 |
| **27.** Barbados | .769 |
| **28.** Moldovia | .768 |
| **29.** Denmark | .768 |

| Country | Gender Gap Score |
|---|---|
| **30.** United States | .763 |
| **31.** Netherlands | .762 |
| **32.** Mozambique | .758 |
| **33.** Belarus | .758 |
| **34.** Mexico | .757 |
| **35.** Argentina | .752 |
| **36.** Laos PDR | .750 |
| **37.** Trinidad and Tobago | .749 |
| **38.** Bulgaria | .746 |
| **39.** Cuba | .746 |
| **40.** Jamaica | .741 |
| **41.** Slovenia | .741 |
| **42.** Ecuador | .739 |
| **43.** El Salvador | .738 |
| **44.** Panama | .737 |
| **45.** Croatia | .733 |
| **46.** Estonia | .733 |
| **47.** Zimbabwe | .732 |
| **48.** Montenegro | .732 |
| **49.** Georgia | .732 |
| **50.** Australia | .731 |

*Source:* World Economic Forum. (2018). Global gap report. Accessed November 11, 2019, from http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/

Swedish men. He decided preschools were a good place to start. Preschool in Sweden is government funded, and children can spend up to 12 hours a day there for a nominal cost.

Gens began his program at two preschools. Girls and boys were put in separate groups where they practiced activities not usually associated with their gender. Boys massaged each other's feet while girls were told to throw open the window and scream. Teachers were videotaped so they could identify the subtle biases in their interactions with children based on gender. One teacher, Helena Baggstrom, remembers watching herself attend to children as they got ready to go outside. One by one, she helped the boys with their coats and gloves, while the girls were expected to dress themselves. Though patterns like these were difficult to see, they emerged as

teachers watched themselves. The strategy of separating boys and girls for different activities eventually changed, but the experiment Gens began percolated through Swedish society. In 1998, Sweden added new language to its national educational curriculum, requiring that all preschools "counteract traditional gender roles and gender patterns" and encourage children to explore "outside the limitations of stereotyped gender roles" (Barry, 2018).

These regulations were applied unevenly across different preschools, but in 2010, a gender-neutral preschool, Egalia, was founded. Egalia is located in a wealthy suburb of Stockholm and made the news for teachers' refusal to use gendered pronouns like *him* and *her* (or *han* and *hon* in Swedish). The school is state funded and popular with parents, boasting a long waiting list for children to get in. Director Lotta Rajalin explains that at Egalia, the goal is to make sure all children are exposed to the full spectrum of qualities and activities normally seen as feminine or masculine. "We want to give the whole spectrum of life, not just half—that's why we are doing this. We want the children to get to know all the things in life, not to just see half of it," Rajalin stated (Hebblethwaite, 2011).

At Egalia, they have all the same toys you'd see in a normal preschool—dolls, tractors, and sandpits. But toys are placed deliberately side-by-side to encourage children to play with them together. Books are selected for their gender-neutral content. So instead of *Sleeping Beauty* or *Cinderella*, there are books about two giraffes who find and adopt a baby crocodile. Teachers are careful not to box children into certain activities or assumptions based on their gender. Instead of referring to them as "boys and girls," teachers might say "friends" or "buddies" or simply use individual names (Hebblethwaite, 2011). Or teachers might use Sweden's gender-neutral pronoun, *hen*, which was officially added to the Swedish language in 2012.

Figure 4.2 demonstrates some playful words and phrases for addressing a gender-neutral group in English. Many of these are more appropriate for younger people, but some apply across different age groups.

Of course, not everyone in Sweden is in favor of teaching gender neutrality in preschools. Some refer to the programs of Egalia and other preschools as a form of "indoctrination." These accusations ignore the fact that all preschools engage in "indoctrination," in that all engage in gender socialization. The difference with Egalia is that it is intentional about the form gender socialization will take rather than just reinforcing the status quo.

Research suggests that going to preschools like Egalia does change the way children both behave and think regarding gender. In one study, children who attended a gender-neutral preschool in Sweden were more interested in playing with unfamiliar children of another gender than their counterparts in traditional preschools. Children in the gender-neutral preschool were also less likely to engage in gender stereotyping than those in traditional preschools (Shutts et al., 2015). Research shows that having fewer gender stereotypes is a good thing, reducing the risk of both physical and mental health problems. The Global Early Adolescent Study found that growing up in a culture with gender stereotypes leaves girls at a greater risk of exposure to physical and sexual violence. For boys, the damage of gender stereotypes include substance abuse and suicide (Scott, 2018).

Going to a gender-neutral preschool didn't completely erase gender for children, though. Children were not less likely to automatically encode the gender of other children as compared

**FIGURE 4.2 ■ Gender-Neutral Terms to Address a Group**

*Source:* Courtesy of Sylvia Duckworth

to those in traditional preschools. In other words, children at preschools like Egalia still engaged in gender attribution. They still looked at other kids and put them into a gender category. Going back to our gender theories helps us understand why this might be. The attempt by teachers to encourage gender neutrality is easily understood through a social learning perspective. Teachers' behavior is a form of top-down socialization.

But even in one of the countries with the highest rate of gender equality in the world, gender still exists. Outside the sheltered environment of the preschool—in their homes, watching TV, interacting with family—children absorb and internalize gender schema. As the cognitive-development theory of gender socialization suggests, children themselves become invested in gender as a category. No doubt, if we were to observe children in a preschool like Egalia, we would still see them performing their gender, even if they might do it less than children in other

preschools. The case of children in places like Egalia demonstrates how difficult it is to completely avoid gender socialization, though that doesn't mean we shouldn't keep trying.

## Doctors Teaching Gender: Intersex Socialization

Gender-neutral preschools in Sweden demonstrate how cultural aspects of a particular society can have an effect on gender socialization. One aspect of cultural beliefs about gender in the Anglo-European world is our belief in sexual dimorphism, as discussed in Chapter 1. Intersex children do not clearly fit into the established order of two sexes and two genders, and so their experience of gender socialization is influenced by one of Anglo-European society's most fundamental cultural beliefs—the existence of two sexes. What does gender socialization look like in the case of intersex individuals who are made to fit into our preexisting sex and gender categories?

For many intersex children, in addition to the key socialization agents of parents, school, church, and the media, the medical community is an important element in how they learn about gender. In her interviews with 37 intersex individuals, Sharon E. Preves (2003) discovered that the experience of repeated surgeries and medical examinations had important effects on the socialization of people who did not clearly fit into existing sex categories. The gender socialization of intersex individuals is supposed to proceed "normally" based on whatever sex is chosen for the children by the doctors. Leaving aside the question for now as to whether there is such a thing as "normal" gender socialization, parents and family are instructed to raise the child as a "normal" boy or girl and to hide the truth of her or his gender variation from the child.

But for most of the individuals in Preves's sample, there was nothing "normal" about the repeated medical procedures to which these children were subjected; 95% of her sample underwent some kind of surgical intervention. These experiences taught intersex children that there was something wrong with them, although they were never certain exactly what it was. Many came to see themselves as freakish or monstrous. Especially interesting in Preves's study are the cases of the few individuals who did *not* undergo any surgical intervention at a young age. Surgery is prescribed by doctors to avoid the social stigma that they assume will result from having ambiguous genitalia as a child. But one of the few individuals who was born with ambiguous genitalia and did *not* undergo surgery described other children's reaction to seeing their naked body with the following description:

> It was at some point in my youth when I was playing doctor with other kids, or playing take off your clothes and show and tell, and realizing that I was different from anybody else there. And I also remember it wasn't a big deal at all. Everybody was like, "Wow! That's cool. Hey, you look like this, I look like this. Oh, yeah, cool, fine, whatever." And that wasn't really a big deal at all. (Preves, 2003, pp. 64–65)

In this case, the experience of having been born with genitalia outside of the typical male/female binary was not at all stigmatizing to this individual as a child. According to Preves's (2003) study, the individuals who had experienced repeated surgeries and medical examinations often compared their experiences to sexual abuse, feeling that as children, they were turned into a "freak show" or "dog and pony show" (p. 66) for doctors and other medical professionals. One individual who had been raised as a female was told by a doctor that her ovaries (which were

actually undeveloped testes) had to be removed because they were precancerous and that, if they were not removed, she would develop cancer very soon. She spent much of her childhood worrying about dying. Another individual was told that if she stopped taking her medicine (hormone pills to prevent the development of secondary sex characteristics), she would die. In general, Preves's research demonstrates that the psychological damage done to these individuals' sense of self might far outweigh any of the possible negative experiences of living with the bodies into which they are born, without the intervention of surgery.

## Doctors and Gender Socialization

The extent to which doctors are involved as agents of gender socialization in the lives of intersex children is demonstrated by two experiences Preves (2003) identified among individuals in her study. First, doctors' examinations of intersex children involved repeatedly putting the genitals or naked bodies of these children on display. This included photographs taken for journal articles, books, or other medical publications. One intersex individual tells a story about being hospitalized for one of her surgeries; she began counting the number of people who paraded through her room to examine her and her genitals but stopped when she had reached more than 100. In addition, as part of the physical examinations, doctors sometimes stimulated genitals (through physical contact) to test for responsiveness. These experiences had long-term effects on how these individuals thought about themselves, their bodies, and their sexuality.

The second way in which doctors served as agents of socialization was in their counseling of intersex individuals about their intimate relationships. As we already mentioned in this chapter, one measure of success for sex reassignment for intersex individuals is that they achieve "normal" gender identity, and that often includes the achievement of heterosexuality. This is because an important component of feminine gender identity for women is to be sexually, emotionally, and psychologically attracted to men. Doctors are therefore somewhat invested in the intimate relationships of intersex patients.

In Preves's (2003) interviews, individuals told how doctors coached them with stories to provide to intimate partners to explain their intersex status in ways that sought to conceal the truth of their intersex status. For example, one doctor provided his patient with an alternative medical explanation to use as an explanation for her short vagina. Another doctor advised his patient, when she started dating, simply to bring her boyfriend in to talk to him rather than trying to explain being intersex or be honest with him about her intersex status.

## Coming Out as Intersex

Preves (2003) compared the experiences of her research subjects to that of many within the queer community and to the important experience of coming out. Like those within gay and lesbian communities, many intersex individuals are increasingly coming out of the closet about their identities. This is a result of the increased visibility of intersex people through organizations like InterACT, a group that advocates for intersex youth, and the Intersex Campaign for Equality, which promotes rights and equality through arts, education, and action. Many of the individuals in Preves's interviews experienced a sense of relief from the anxiety caused by their repeated encounters with the

medical community and the air of secrecy about their situation only when they finally found out what was really "wrong" with them. At least for the individuals in Preves's study, finding out about the true nature of their intersex variation was not, as doctors assumed, a traumatic event.

When many of the individuals in Preves's (2003) study discovered their identity as intersex people, they faced questions about whether or how to share this information with others in their lives. Some individuals described their experiences in terms of trying to pass as someone of one gender or another because they knew their true biological sex did not line up with either gender in expected ways. One intersex individual described this experience of passing in the following way: "I was trying really hard to act like I thought men acted, so I watched my voice very carefully and I watched my mannerisms, and I would observe how men were" (as quoted in Preves, 2003, p. 83). Some developed stories to explain certain features of their intersex status, like scars from past surgeries or their inability to have children.

Preves argued that, in various forms, these individuals searched for some external validation of their gender status, and they pursued a variety of strategies toward this end. One intersex individual described her wedding day as important to this overall task of feeling fully and normally gendered as a woman:

> When I got married was when I really felt so feminine with my bride's dress, my wedding dress, and a veil. I felt so pretty. I was so proud. That was a turning point and that was about the most significant time in my life that was special to me, where I felt like totally female, totally womanly. (Preves, 2003, p. 85)

The same individual goes on to describe how her husband now helps her to feel feminine through his love and the sexual attraction he feels toward her, in addition to making her feel physically small compared to his large size.

Why are the experiences of these individuals important to our general understanding of gender socialization? Can we say that if there is such a thing as "normal" or "typical" gender socialization, the experience of intersex individuals has nothing in common with that norm? Assuming that you yourself are not intersex, was there anything about the experiences of this group of people that sounded familiar to your own experience of gender socialization? Or does the experience of this group of people seem so foreign to your own experiences with gender and socialization as to be completely unrecognizable? Intersex individuals are important to the question of nature versus nurture. In theory, their stories could show us what socialization might be like in the absence of sex. But as we have discussed, this is not what happens in the Anglo-European world with intersex individuals. Biological sex is medically imposed on these individuals. What we learn from Preves and similar studies (Davis, 2015) are the damaging effects of this particular framework for dealing with intersex individuals.

But take a step back and think about what intersex individuals learn from their interaction with doctors and the medical establishment. The lesson they are being taught, even though they may not become aware of it until later, is that to be born without an obvious sex is both a dark and terrifying secret and a fascinating medical and biological phenomenon. The experiences of these individuals teach us that, at least in Anglo-European society, being intersex is both fascinating and terrifying. When doctors encourage a culture of secrecy and lies, lying to

parents of intersex children and to intersex children themselves, and eventually encouraging the intersex individuals themselves to lie, they are patrolling society's entrenched beliefs in the existence of sex and gender.

What is so dangerous about knowledge of being intersex? The experiences of these children teach us that part of the context within which socialization occurs in many cultures is a rigid sex/gender system that needs to be protected from any individuals, like intersex people, who disturb its smooth operation. This is why the truth of intersex people is so frightening; it calls into question too many of the basic assumptions of this particular society.

Once intersex individuals find out about their status as intersex, they may feel like they are attempting to pass as a true gender. Here's how one intersexual individual in Preves's (2003) study described this feeling: "I think you are constantly monitoring yourself. Is this the way women act? Is this what women think? Is this how women are? It's maybe not something that you do consciously, but it's a constant kind of trying to fit in" (as quoted in Preves, 2003, p. 82). This description might sound familiar, thinking back to our discussion of the doing-gender perspective. Remember, according to this point of view, all of us are passing as a gender through making our actions accountable to others as gendered.

You might argue from this perspective that the experiences of intersex individuals and the ways in which they experience gender socialization are different only because their unique position makes them more aware of gender as a performance, as an attempt to pass as a woman or a man. A few intersex individuals Preves interviewed came to describe their experience of gender as being like the performance of drag, or performing a series of roles that don't reflect any underlying reality. One intersex individual described it this way: "And in this society, all I really do is drag. I do the execu-dyke drag, I do girl drag, I do boy drag. This is girl drag, what I'm wearing today" (as quoted in Preves, 2003, p. 86). The doing-gender perspective would argue that what we have in common with intersex children and adults is that socialization merely teaches us this ability to perform. Although intersex individuals may be more aware of this performative nature of gender, all of us are, to some extent, doing drag.

Research on adolescents who are not intersex reveals similar dynamics, especially for girls as they go through puberty. Girls experiencing their first menstrual period, developing breasts, and growing pubic hair all wonder whether their experiences and their bodies are, in fact, normal (Martin, 1996). These stories teach us that all of us are plagued by concerns about our normality. We worry about our normality in terms of our biological sex, our performance of gender, the direction of our desires and attractions (toward the same gender, different gender, or some combination of both), and a thousand other gender-related aspects of our lives.

Queer theorists might argue that the categories of sex, gender, and sexual orientation make all of us, at one time or another, feel like a freak or a monster. This is not to say all of us suffer in quite the same way or to the same degree as intersex children. But queer theorists would point out that gender makes freaks of us all, and so we have much more in common with intersex people than you might at first expect. Queer theory as a perspective suggests that the experiences of intersex individuals merely help them become more aware of these connections that all of us have experienced at one time or another.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of moments you have experienced that are similar to those described by some of these intersex individuals, when you questioned whether your actions or thoughts were consistent with your sex category and gender? Have you ever thought to yourself,* Is this what women do? *or* Is this what men do? *and been uncertain about whether your own behavior fit within expectations about your gender?*

### The Importance of Peer Groups

When I ask students in my classes to write personal accounts of their own gender socialization, they usually focus on stories about how their parents or other adults encouraged or discouraged them to engage in various activities. There's usually at least one story about how a sibling of the other gender was treated differently—a brother allowed to stay out later than a sister or a sister being scolded less harshly than a brother. There's almost always some discussion of toys, Barbie versus Power Rangers, and memories of rooms being painted pink or blue. They might tell stories about being uncertain about their gender identity or about knowing that the gender they'd been assigned at birth was wrong. There's usually not a lot of focus on the next aspect of socialization we'll discuss: the importance of peer groups to gender socialization.

Barrie Thorne's (1993) ethnography of girls and boys in their early school years (kindergarten through fifth grade) was one of the first studies to look at peers and gender socialization, and she found that gender is important to the organization of play among young children at school. On the playgrounds of the two working-class American schools that Thorne observed, girls and boys were often involved in gender-segregated activities; girls played games that took up less space, like jumping rope, doing tricks on the monkey bars, or four-square, while boys ranged over wider areas of space and tended to play competitive sports like soccer, basketball, or football. Thorne also brought attention to the moments when play and interaction were not gender segregated; boys and girls interacted across genders in several ways, sometimes reaffirming gender boundaries (through games of pollution, like "cooties") and enacting heterosexuality (using taunts like "Jimmy likes Betty" or "Betty likes Jimmy").

But Thorne also found certain situations in which gender as an organizing category became relatively less important. One example was when children were engaged in a particularly absorbing project that required cooperation, like a group art project or organizing a radio show. Thorne's research drew attention to the ways in which children engaged in behavior that often reinforced traditional gender ideas but sometimes challenged or ignored those ideas as well. In other words, children are active shapers of gender socialization rather than passive recipients, and they do not simply absorb gender as it is channeled through their parents and other adults.

### Slopes and Skirts: Socialization Into or Out of Sports

One of the things you might have noticed from Thorne's research is that boys tended to spend time on the playground playing competitive sports, while girls engaged in less sporty activities,

like jump rope or doing tricks on the monkey bars. This is one example of how the socialization children experience can have long-term effects. Small differences in gender socialization like this add up over time, influencing both women's participation in sports and their performance when they do play.

From a very young age, parents demonstrate their deep-seated beliefs about gender and physical activity as they interact with their babies. In one study, mothers put their 11-month old babies on a carpeted incline to crawl down. The incline was gated on both sides, so the babies would be safe. Experimenters then asked the mothers to set the incline to the steepest slope they thought their baby was capable of crawling down. Mothers set the slope much steeper for their sons than they did for their daughters, even though the study showed no gender difference in the ability of boys or girls to crawl down the slope. In another study, both mothers and fathers discouraged risk-taking behaviors on the playground for their daughters more than they did for their sons (Vedantum, 2018).

Other studies on children in preschool settings note the way that the movements of girls and boys are patrolled differently. Skirts and dresses are the first barrier to free movement for little girls, even for those as young as 5 years old. There's nothing inherently restrictive about a skirt. In fact, you could argue that skirts and dresses are less limiting of mobility. The problem comes with the norms little girls internalize about the proper way to move in a dress or a skirt.

Even at the age of 5, young girls understand that the rules for wearing a skirt dictate that you cannot move in ways that allow anyone to see under the skirt. A girl wearing pants can put her feet up on the table, but a girl in a dress cannot. Skirts and dresses can be lifted up, and at 5, girls have internalized how embarrassing this exposure is. What girls who wear skirts and dresses learn, then, is how to either manage their own clothing or have their clothing managed and controlled for them. Skirts and dresses end up restricting movement rather than encouraging it (Martin, 1998).

Preschool girls partly patrolled their own movement through clothing, consistent with a cognitive development or gender schema approach, where girls are active participants in their own gender socialization. But they were also physically disciplined by their teachers to be silent and avoid conflicts, resulting in smaller bodily movements relative to boys. The physical activity of boys was patrolled, but not as successfully (boys were more likely to ignore teachers with little consequences). Boys took up more space and used loud voices in intense conflicts with little teacher intervention (Martin, 1998). Teachers, in other words, were rewarding and punishing different types of behaviors in their girl and boy students.

Why does it matter how little girls and boys move in preschool, and how is it connected to their socialization into or out of sports? Research tells us that the sensitive period for learning fundamental motor skills is between the ages of 2 and 8. During this window, the effects of learning experiences on the brain are particularly strong. Physical skills can be learned outside of this window, but they'll be more difficult to master, and typically, athletes who begin learning their skills past this window will never develop the same level of proficiency. If girls are prevented from developing crucial physical skills during this sensitive period, it explains why boys, on average, are better at fundamental motor skills like object control (throwing, catching, and kicking) and body control (agility) (Vealey & Chase, 2016). The bodily movements of

3-year-old girls and boys were much more similar compared to boys and girls at 5. In just those 2 years, girls and boys learn to move differently (Martin, 1998).

In a top-down approach, parents, teachers, and coaches interact with boys and girls differently, which leads to disparities in their physical abilities. That isn't all that's going on with girls and sports participation, though. Girls tend to start playing sports at later ages and drop out of sports at higher levels, though this varies across different settings and contexts. On average, girls enter sports at 7.4 years old compared to 6.8 years old for boys, but the disparity is much greater in urban communities, where girls start playing at 7.8 and boys at 6.9 years old (Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

Why do girls enter sports later and drop out with greater frequency? The explanation is complicated, including structural factors that create fewer opportunities for girls to play sports. One estimate suggests that in high school alone, girls have 1.3 million fewer opportunities to play sports than boys. Girls may lack adequate facilities to play sports, especially in urban areas. As girls progress in sports, the quality of their experience often declines in ways that aren't true for boys. Girls are forced to play on the lower-quality field or court and settle for coaches with less experience. Equipment and uniforms often aren't funded at the same level for girls' sports (Women's Sports Foundation, 2022).

At the level of peer influence, the stigma associated with playing sports is also an important factor. Even in 2022, girls still faced the possibility of being seen as too masculine or as gay for playing certain sports. Obviously, there's nothing wrong with being masculine or a lesbian, but these are both statuses that can result in bullying and social isolation for young girls. As teenagers, the fear of being labeled "gay" is enough to drive many girls away from sports (Women Sport's Foundation, 2022).

Even in 2022, there's still a stigma for girls playing sports, but that stigma varies by the specific sport. In one study, researchers asked Black and white students in the ninth and tenth grades about the perceptions of the gender appropriateness of various sports. Boys and girls across racial categories agreed that sports like soccer, Frisbee, tennis, racquetball, and swimming, were gender neutral while softball and volleyball were seen as feminine. Black and white students disagreed on which sports were masculine, with white students listing baseball, basketball, and football as masculine while Black students were less likely to see baseball and basketball as masculine (Hannon et al., 2009).

When asked which sports were "best" for girls or boys, there were similar levels of agreement. Football, wrestling, and boxing were seen as the best sports for boys, while volleyball, gymnastics, and softball were seen as best for girls. When students were asked why certain sports were better for one gender or the other, their answers for boy sports were: because it's a physical/contact sport; because boys like it; and because girls cannot handle it. Sports were best for girls because: it is non-contact/less physical; girls are flexible; girls like it (Hannon et al., 2009). What this research shows is that boys and girls have clear ideas about which sports are appropriate based on gender, supporting the stigma that would come with being a girl playing baseball or football.

At all these different levels, gender socialization creates boys and men who have better physical skills than girls and women. Boys have more opportunity at a very young age to develop the core motor skills necessary for sports excellence. Their movements are less patrolled by teachers and parents. They're allowed and encourage to engage in riskier behavior on the playgrounds, where

their games take up more space. They receive more resources and opportunities to play sports as they age. It's no wonder that many boys and men become better athletes than girls and women.

Of course, there are average physical differences between women's and men's bodies. Men tend to have less body fat than women. But even today, with many more opportunities granted to girls in sports than has been true in the past, it's difficult to tease out which differences in athletic ability are due to biology and which are due to a lifetime of gender socialization away from athletic ability.

### Varieties of Peer Culture

Peer cultures are one factor that contribute to girls' and boys' socialization into sports and gender. In a wide variety of settings, peer cultures are important for helping us learn how to be gendered, even when the particular messages are less than beneficial. Research on boys in disadvantaged neighborhoods suggests that gender socialization into masculinity can encourage delinquent and criminal behavior (Harding, 2009; Rios, 2011). In a study of three Boston neighborhoods, David Harding found that boys who were forced to interact more with older male peers in their neighborhood learned a wide range of lessons about how to be a man, including an introduction to local frameworks that legitimated violence and criminality. The boys in neighborhoods with more interaction with older peers also adopted a certain model of romantic interaction with women, expecting girls to fall into categories such as "stunts," who are just after sex and may transmit sexual diseases, and "golddiggers," who are after a man's money and attempt to trick him into fathering a child (Harding, 2009).

In his study of Latino and Black young men in Oakland, California, Victor Rios (2011) found that access to alternative forms of demonstrating masculinity for these boys was blocked. Their peers, as well as their encounters with the police, led them to prove their masculinity through crime. Boys demonstrated what ethnographer Elijah Anderson (1999) called **young male syndrome**, or the perceived, expected, and often necessary pressure to perform a tough, violent, and deviant manhood in order to receive and maintain respect. For the boys in Rios's (2011) study, their socialization into masculinity reinforced their position in the **youth control complex**, an all-encompassing system of criminalization molded by the synchronized, systematic punishment meted out by socializing and social control institutions. In other words, for these boys, many of the institutions and groups normally engaged in socialization—teachers, parents, and friends—assumed the boys were criminals and socialized them accordingly. In such a scenario, it becomes difficult even for nondelinquent boys not to get swept up into the system of hypercriminalization. The particular version of masculinity learned in this peer culture could have long-term negative consequences, demonstrating the concept of marginalized masculinity discussed in Chapter 2.

## LEARNING GENDER NEVER ENDS: SECONDARY SOCIALIZATION

Up until this point, we've dealt mainly with primary socialization—the ways in which we initially learn gender from those close primary groups such as family and childhood friends. For many of us, the first years of our lives revolve around these primary groups. And throughout

our lives, although our primary groups may have changed (as we formed our own families in a multitude of ways), these collections of people remain important sources of gender socialization.

However, for many of us, the process of growing up involves increasing contact with secondary groups and therefore moves us into the realm of secondary socialization. **Secondary groups** are generally larger, more temporary, more impersonal, and more specialized than primary groups. They tend to be more specialized in that they focus on one or two primary goals rather than on the unspecialized set of goals (if they can even be called that) that characterize a family as a group. On the other hand, a business organization as a secondary group has a definite purpose: to make money. A college class is another good example of a secondary group.

Every time we join a group, we need to learn the norms and rules of that particular collection of individuals or of that institution. So **secondary socialization** is the learning process that takes place each time we join one of these new secondary groups. In our discussion of work in Chapter 9, we explore the ways in which women and men become socialized into various occupations and the important implications this has for inequality. Unless you're a real hermit, hiding out in the woods somewhere and intentionally avoiding people, you continue to join new secondary groups throughout your life. These groups may have their own ideas about gender and may subtly or not so subtly affect the way in which you think about gender. As a result, the process of gender socialization is by no means fixed at a certain age; it changes greatly throughout the course of a person's life.

## Learning to Be American: Socialization Through Immigration

We've already begun to see that the range of agents of socialization that help us learn gender is varied and extensive. There are many possible sources for our knowledge about how to be gendered, including parents, doctors, and other children. The experiences of immigrants and their children adapting to the culture of a new country serves as a good example of how socialization extends beyond childhood and how institutions as large as nations themselves can serve as agents of gender socialization. It may seem strange at first to think about nations as a source of knowledge for how to be gendered. But if you've traveled to other countries or even seen foreign movies or TV shows, you might have noticed some obvious differences in how gender works in other places. When people move from one country to another, both these obvious differences and more subtle ones become important in negotiating how to adapt to life in a new country.

### Gender and Hybrid Identities

Lubna Chaudhry (2006) documented how four young Pakistani Muslim women in the United States created hybrid identities as they learned how to become at least partial members of the very large secondary group of people called Americans. Having grown up in Pakistan, these young women were socialized in the gender norms of their particular Pakistani and Islamic culture. In the United States, they were faced with a new set of gender norms that often existed in opposition to those enforced by their parents and other Pakistani Muslim immigrants.

Chaudhry demonstrates through the lives of these four women how they were subtly shaped by their encounters with American culture and their decisions about how to do

gender in their new country. Nida came from a background of family wealth in Pakistan and the United States, where her father owned a prosperous business. When she transferred to American schools from Pakistan, Nida's teachers encouraged her to pursue an advanced degree, reflecting an American gender norm regarding women and education. However, the gender norms of her particular family's clan background dictated that women marry as early as possible after the onset of puberty.

Nida reconciled these conflicting values by marrying early and having a baby at 18 but also continuing to pursue her educational goals, with the support of her husband and her own family. In this sense, Nida chose to adapt to American values, which emphasized the importance of education and upward mobility largely regardless of gender. Her overextended schedule in college as student, wife, and mother was not enjoyable, but she saw it as reflecting part of what it meant to be an American woman. But by marrying and having a child at such a young age by American standards, Nida also chose to uphold the gender norms of her particular Pakistani culture. In this sense, Nida carefully negotiated the boundaries between American and Pakistani identity.

In her study of Filipina women in the United States, Yen Le Espiritu (2005) identified a similar dynamic. From the perspective of immigrants from the Philippines in the United States, family is more important to Filipinos than it is to many white Americans. One Filipino immigrant described it as follows:

> Our [Filipino] culture is different. We are more close-knit. We tend to help one another. Americans, ya know, they are all right, but they don't help each other that much. As a matter of fact, if the parents are old, they take them to a convalescent home and let them rot there. We would never do that in our culture. We would nurse them; we would help them until the end. (p. 234)

According to Espiritu (2005), within this framework, women are considered especially important to upholding the importance of family in Filipino culture. The responsibility of Filipino men lies largely in marrying a Filipina woman. But Filipina women who try to pursue education, jobs, and upward mobility for themselves sometimes feel inhibited by the gender norms placed on them by Filipino culture. One Filipina wife and mother explained these conflicting gender norms through her experience of returning to school to pursue a doctoral degree in nursing:

The Filipinos, we are very collective, very connected. Going through the doctoral program, sometimes I think it is better just to forget about my relatives and just concentrate on school. All that connectedness, it steals parts of myself because all of my energies are devoted to my family. And that is the reason why I think Americans are successful. The majority of American people they can do what they want. They don't feel guilty because they only have a few people to relate to. For us Filipinos, it's like roots under the tree. You have all these connections. The Americans are more like the trunk. I am still trying to go up to the trunk of the tree but it is too hard. I want to be more independent, more like the Americans. (pp. 235–236)

Like Nida, this Filipina woman struggled with trying to achieve the goals set out by American culture for women—independence and success—while still retaining her ties to her

Filipino family and community. The gender norms prescribed by Filipino culture made achieving the gender norms set out by American culture more difficult.

The cases of Pakistani Muslim and Filipina women demonstrate how secondary socialization can have important impacts on the way in which we experience gender. Nida's immigration to the United States exposed her to new secondary groups in her schools, including her teachers and female classmates. Learning American gender norms and values transformed the way she thought about what it meant to be a woman. The Filipina women were similarly exposed to the more individualistic values of American women and found themselves feeling torn between family obligations and their own desire for independence. Immigrating to a country means joining a whole host of new secondary groups while, in the case of these women, maintaining primary groups in the form of families.

These women's experiences demonstrate the complexity of socialization, in that often we receive messages about how to be gendered from many different sources, and those messages often contradict each other. Not all of us may have had the experience of immigrating to a new country, but all of us have joined new groups at some point in our lives and have found ourselves negotiating new sets of norms, some of them related to gender. As suggested by both cognitive-development theory and Bem's (1983, 1993) gender schema theory, women like Nida have some ability to socialize themselves by picking and choosing which of the gender norms of their new culture they will follow and which gender norms from their country of origin they will retain. The case of Pakistani Muslim and Filipina immigrants demonstrates that socialization is a process that we actively shape throughout our lifetimes as we join new groups.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of an experience in which you joined a new group and had to adapt to a new set of norms? Were there specific norms related to gender that were different in your new group? How did you negotiate these new gender norms?*

## WHAT HAPPENS TO GENDER AS WE AGE?

We've already begun to explore the ways in which gender is never really a free-floating concept that exists without being attached to a multitude of other identities as well as cultural and historical contexts. There is no normal experience of what it means to be gendered but only many multiple and often contradictory ways of experiencing this social category. To explore how this is true as it relates to gender socialization, think about an older person you know, perhaps a grandfather, grandmother, or other older relative. Gender socialization teaches us the rules about gender. How do those rules change as we age? What are the new rules we have to learn in our 40s, our 60s, or our 80s?

Looking at how key experiences and social roles influence individuals' lives is the focus of a **life-course perspective**. Each life course consists of a biography that transforms through

exposure to new social settings, and this unfolds in an interactive trajectory. So having been married—one life-course event—will affect how an individual experiences retirement or old age. Research that combines a life-course perspective with an intersectional approach to the study of gender ideology reveals some results that highlight the importance of taking into account how other identities interact with gender.

Important life events like marriage, parenthood, and work have different effects on gender ideology depending on racial identity (Vespa, 2009). Getting married is associated with a more egalitarian gender ideology among African Americans but a less egalitarian ideology among whites, and this relationship is strongest among white men. Having more children leads to less egalitarian gender ideologies among Black men and white women. But the presence of young children actually increases Black women's gender-egalitarian ideology. Finally, with increases in full-time work, men become less egalitarian while women become more egalitarian (Vespa, 2009).

This research demonstrates how gender socialization is an ongoing process that continues well beyond childhood and adolescence. Our particular gender ideologies are not set in stone when we graduate from high school or college. Life experiences continue to change the way we think about gender in our own lives. As intersectional theory suggests, these changes depend on how gender interacts with other categories like our racial and ethnic identities.

Like gender, age is socially constructed. To see how this is true, you only have to think of the phrase "Act your age." We might use this phrase to motivate children to act more "mature" but also for older women or men to remind them that certain "youthful" activities are off-limits for them. So while it might be OK for an 18-year-old to stay out all night at a club, we find an 80-year-old who does the same thing irresponsible or maybe even crazy. If our behaviors were truly determined solely by our biological age, there'd be no reason to have to keep reminding people to act in ways deemed age-appropriate. Instead, we have to patrol behaviors to keep them in line with societal expectations about what is and isn't OK for people of different ages. Those ideas change over time and across cultures. In the past and in many cultures still today, it's age-appropriate for young children to work, while in other cultures, laws and social norms make sure that children don't engage in work because it's not seen as part of "acting their age."

Just as there are rules about gender that we have to learn, there are also age-related rules. Not surprisingly, these rules overlap with gender. Very young girls are generally not supposed to dress in ways that accentuate their sexuality, but neither are old women. Older women are expected to accept the societal belief that they are no longer sexually attractive and thus dress in ways that minimize their sexuality. If they don't conform, they are likely to be seen as rebels, eccentric, or desperate (Kennedy, 1993). The rules about women's sexuality as they age are one example of **ageism**, or prejudice based on a preference for the young and equating of signs of aging with decreased social value (Butler, 1969). Ageism has differing effects on men and women. Because more emphasis in general is placed on women's attractiveness relative to men's, women lose more esteem as they age. As men age, they're better able to replace esteemed qualities such as physical prowess and looks with a new emphasis on career success as well as gains in wisdom, skill, and money (Sontag, 1972).

## THINK ABOUT IT

*What are some other age-related rules that are also gendered? Are there activities that are seen as okay for younger men or women but not for older men or women? How do these rules intersect with other identities such as race, ability, sexual identity, or religion?*

### The Gender of Caregiving and Alzheimer's

One of the most pressing issues for elderly populations is figuring out who will care for them into old age. The United States, with its aging population of baby boomers, is increasingly becoming a nation of caregivers. Eighteen percent of Americans (43.5 million people) care for either a parent or a child (AARP Public Policy Institute & National Alliance for Caregiving, 2015). The majority of all caregivers (60%) are women, while two thirds of the 11.2 million people caring for Alzheimer's patients specifically are women (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Studies show that half of women caregivers and a third of men caregivers provide more than 40 hours per week of care and that women, on average, spend 4 more hours caregiving per week than men.

That women are more likely to be caregivers and to spend more time engaged in caregiving is not surprising, given our expectation that caregiving is feminine work. If we emphasize the nurturing and emotional aspects of caregiving, it makes sense to view it as a feminine activity. But receiving care, with its assumption of passivity and dependence, is also seen as more feminine in nature. Given these perceptions, how do men do when they are forced into care-receiving roles later in life?

Men as the recipients of care may experience their lack of autonomy and control as emasculating. This is especially true when diseases like Alzheimer's affect the ability to carry out normal, routine activities. One example is driving, which is important to our internal sense of self as well as to how we might be perceived by the larger community. Research demonstrates that no longer being able to drive is a loss experienced acutely by men, who see it as a loss of their sense of self and of their manhood (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). This added dimension of aging for men may explain gender differences in patient behavior. One study suggests that wives as caregivers reported a higher incidence of problem behaviors such as falling down, making excessive demands, or asking repeated questions among their care-receiving male spouses.

The structure of masculinity may make it more difficult for men to receive care. Does it also impede men's ability to give care? Men as caregivers seem to approach this role differently than do their women counterparts. Men see caregiving as a task that can simply be added to their list of other activities. Men caregivers are less likely than women to be working full time, though this may be because women reduce or end their employment in order to take care of family while men are less likely to alter their working life.

Research also suggests that, against expectations, men have higher perceived competence at caregiving. Though care work may be associated with femininity, competence is a decidedly masculine quality, and so men apply this confidence in their abilities to the new sphere of care

work. Though women seem much more affected by the stress of dealing with a spouse with Alzheimer's, it's difficult to separate this from the norms of stoicism associated with masculinity. That is, men may report less stress from caring for a spouse because it goes against norms of masculinity to admit to this kind of weakness.

In general, then, the power of masculinity to affect new behaviors later in life seems to persist. Though caregiving has the potential to transform the way men perform their masculinity later in life, research suggests that they're more likely to assimilate caregiving into existing ideas about masculinity.

## SUMMING UP

Perhaps after what we have explored in this chapter, our attachment to our gender identities should come as no surprise. Our gendered lives begin even before we leave the womb, because we enter societies that have already made decisions about how our sex and gender will be determined. In addition, the content of the cultures into which we are born will partially dictate exactly what gender lessons we learn. Within our families, parents, siblings, and other relatives surround us with subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) messages about what it means to be a gendered person. Even those whose biological makeup does not fit within established sex categories—intersex individuals—are indoctrinated within a gender system.

Gender is all around us, and that it quickly becomes internalized by infants and children should come as no surprise. We can understand how gender identities become important to our sense of ourselves through the socialization theories that emphasize how children are self-motivated to acquire gender. Cognitive-development theory and gender schema theory both emphasize the active role of children in accomplishing their own socialization. If we are motivated early on as children to become gendered beings, then it makes sense to think that we would also find it difficult to lose or alter parts of our gendered identity later in our lives. Exploring gender socialization helps us to think about the nature of gender as a social phenomenon. If gender is a source of inequality, then certainly part of our mission should be to change gender as a social system or even to do away with it altogether. But how are we to accomplish such tasks if people are attached to their gender identities in real and important ways? This is just one of the questions we will continue to explore in the next chapters.

## BIG QUESTIONS

- In this chapter, we talked about the difficulty of defining a normal or typical story of gender socialization. How does this fit in with some of the theories and concerns regarding gender you've read about in previous chapters? For example, how does it line up with some of the critiques of feminism by women of color, lesbian women, and women from the global South? Why is an understanding of the specific social context important to understanding the process of gender socialization?

- Theories of gender socialization are examples of individual-level perspectives on gender because they emphasize how gender becomes internalized. What are potential problems with perceiving gender as largely something that operates from the inside out or as something that internally motivates people?
- Assume you wanted to change your current gender system or do away with gender as a system altogether. Looking at each of the theories of gender socialization covered in this chapter, how would each theory imply you go about doing that? In other words, what course of action does each theory imply if you want to change the way we experience gender? Is this harder or easier to do from the perspective of one of these theories compared with another?
- How would you define what successful socialization is? What criteria would you use to measure whether an adult has been successfully gender socialized? What would gender socialization that was not successful look like? How would these answers change depending on the time period or culture?
- One of the questions raised by the case of intersex children is what it would mean to raise a child who does not fit into existing sex or gender categories. How could you raise a child without a sex or gender? What problems would this present? How would other people treat this child? How might it affect the way the child thinks about itself and the outside world?
- Some of the theories we discussed in this chapter were developed specifically to explain gender socialization, while others were developed to explain the process of socialization more generally. Are there important differences in these two types of theories? Are there advantages and disadvantages to each approach? Could the gender-specific theories of socialization be used to explain how we learn about other categories, such as race, social class, or sexuality?
- In Chapter 1, we discussed biosocial and strong social constructionist approaches to the relationship between sex and gender. How would you sort the theories covered in this chapter into one of these two approaches? Which theories seem to be based on the assumption that there are two types of people, male and female, and which are based on the assumption that sex itself is socially constructed?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. Try to remember a specific incident or event from your own childhood or adolescence in which you learned what it meant to be masculine or feminine, a boy or a girl. Write a story or an account of that incident. Which theory seems to best explain the process of gender socialization in your story? Would this particular theory explain all the stories of gender socialization from your own history or just this one in particular?
2. Interview several people who you believe are likely to have experiences of gender socialization that are very different from your own. This could be someone of a different

gender, different race, different social class, different sexual orientation, different age, or different culture, for example. Ask them to tell you stories about how they learned what it meant to be a boy or a girl. How do their experiences compare with your own? How do their stories demonstrate the ways in which the specific context in which gender socialization takes place is important?

3. According to gender schema theory, objects, feelings, and descriptions can all be perceived as gendered. Come up with a list of objects, feelings, and descriptions, and ask several people to give all the items on your list a gender. Do people have trouble assigning a gender to the items on your list, or does it seem like an easy thing for them to do? Do consistencies emerge in the gender assigned to the items on your list, or are there variations? What does your experiment suggest about the strength of gender schema theory?

4. In this chapter, we discussed the sometimes traumatic socialization experiences of intersex individuals. Many organizations have been founded to defend the rights and represent the perspectives of intersex individuals, including InterACT (Advocates for Intersex Youth). Go to their website (https://interactadvocates.org/) and explore some of the materials and information there. How would you characterize their perspective on what it means to be intersex? What suggestions does the organization make about the best approaches to intersex care? What are some of the issues InterACT raises related to being intersex? Does their perspective seem to assume that everyone should be made to fit into one of two sex categories (male or female) or that there might be other possibilities beyond male and female?

5. In 2020, a hospital in Chicago became the first to officially pause surgery on intersex infants, in response to protests by intersex activists. Read about the story here: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/30/first-us-hospital-pledges-end-intersex-surgeries#. Then research other policies on intersex surgery in other countries. Why is it difficult to convince doctors and medical organizations to stop intersex surgery? How would you explain to a doctor or hospital why intersex surgeries on infants should stop?

6. Find some examples of popular media targeted toward children or adolescents. This could include TV commercials, TV shows, YouTube, cartoons, movies, food (like McDonald's Happy Meals), toys, video games, radio stations, and websites. What kinds of messages do these media seem to be sending to children or adolescents about gender? Do they seem to depict both women and men equally? Do people of different genders seem to be engaged in different kinds of activities? Do you think the messages being sent in these media can be considered to challenge the gender status quo or reinforce it?

7. If you have access to some children (your own, relatives, or the children of friends), spend some time with them, either playing with them yourself or observing them playing with each other. Or observe some children playing at a local park. Is there a gender to the play you observe? Can you see examples of the **gender transgression zone** as described in this chapter or of children patrolling this zone? Do there seem to be differences in gendered behavior among children of different ages? How does that line up with the predictions of some of the theories we discussed in this chapter?

8. How would you design your own gender-neutral preschool? Or elementary school? Or middle or high school? Would the building itself look different? What would recess be like? Would you teach different subjects? Would there be no classrooms at all? What changes would be necessary to make education as gender neutral as possible?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**Welcoming Schools: A Project of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation**

A resource for educators and parents for issues related to LGBTQ kids in schools.

www.welcomingschools.org/pages/affirming-gender-in-elementary-school-social-transitioning

**InterACT: Advocates for Intersex Youth**

A nonprofit that uses innovative legal and other strategies to advocate for the human rights of children born with intersex traits.

interactadvocates.org

**Gender Spectrum**

A website dedicated to helping to create gender-sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens.

www.genderspectrum.org

## KEY TERMS

Ageism
Agents of socialization
Androcentrism
Cognitive-development theory
Ego boundaries
Enculturation
Gender congruency
Gender constancy
Gender norms
Gender polarization
Gender schema
Gender schema theory
Gender socialization
Gender stability
Gender transgression zone
Genital tubercle
Intersex
Life-course perspective
Primary groups
Primary socialization
Psychoanalytic identification
Psychoanalytic theory
Schema
Secondary groups
Secondary socialization
Sex-typed behaviors
Social learning theory
Socialization
Target of socialization
Young male syndrome
Youth control complex

## SUGGESTED READINGS

### ON SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

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Davis, G. (2015). *Contesting intersex: The dubious diagnosis*. New York University Press.

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### ON SOCIALIZATION ACROSS CULTURES

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## ON SOCIALIZATION IN SECONDARY GROUPS

McGuffey, C. S., & Rich, B. L. (1999). Playing in the gender transgression zone. *Gender & Society*, *13*(5), 608–627.

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# 5 HOW DOES GENDER MATTER FOR WHOM WE WANT AND DESIRE?

## The Gender of Sexuality

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **5.1** Describe the difference between sexuality and sexual identity.
- **5.2** Summarize some ways gender has been linked to sexuality throughout history and across cultures.
- **5.3** Explain the significance of Alfred Kinsey's research on sexuality.
- **5.4** Understand where sexual scripts come from and how they guide sexual behavior.
- **5.5** Discuss some examples of women and men going off-script with sexual behaviors.
- **5.6** Define hetero-privilege and describe some examples of how it is seen in society.

When was the first time you knew about something out there called *sex*? How did you figure out what sex was, and was that initial picture right? What's the difference between *having* sex, *doing* sex, and being *sexual*? How are all of those things connected to your gender?

Who are appropriate partners for sexual relationships, and how are they different from appropriate partners for friendship or romantic relationships? How are sex, love, and attraction all related to each other? What makes someone homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, or asexual? Does having sex with someone of a different gender make you heterosexual? Does having sex with someone of the same gender make you homosexual? Is being heterosexual something you do (have sex with people of the opposite sex) or something you are (a basis for identity)?

What are all the possible ways in which we could create categories around sexuality, and would they all have to do with sex category or gender? Are there differences in the ways you experience sex based on your gender? What about people who don't experience sexual desire? Or people who don't have a gender? What would any of these things—sex, sexuality, feeling sexual—mean in a world without gender? Can you answer any of the questions we've posed without referring in some way to gender? What are the ways in which gender and sexuality are related?

As we explore in this chapter, it's difficult to have a conversation about gender without also talking about sexuality. Sexuality is something that's discussed throughout this book, but in

this chapter, we take a more intentional and in-depth look at the topic of sexuality and how it relates to gender. We also begin to look for the answers to some of the questions we've posed. Sexuality, as you may have begun to realize in the previous list of questions, can include a broad range of behaviors, feelings, and identities, and almost all of them have some kind of gendered dimension in Anglo-European societies. As we explore in this chapter, the way we feel sexually and the ways in which we are expected to act sexually are determined in important ways by our gender. In addition, how we understand categories of sexuality in Anglo-European societies also depends on the existence of categories of sex and gender; a society without sex categories or gender would be a society without homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals, or polysexuals. A world without gender would be one in which the way we thought about sexuality would look very different from our current modes of thinking, and this begins to suggest the deep interconnections between these two concepts. New categories of sexuality such as asexual, demisexual, and pansexual are less connected to gender, and we discuss what these new identities might mean for the future of gender and sexuality.

## LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

The subject of sex is a complicated one, and so we need a more precise vocabulary. Of course, a discussion of sexuality has to involve **sex**, or any acts that are defined as sexual. This is a basic definition that can cover a wide range of behaviors. An act considered to be sex by one person—oral sex—may not be considered sex by someone else. Then there's **romantic love**, which involves a couple coming together, sharing the excitement of an erotic relationship, and feeling united with each other in such a way that the object of their love is unique and irreplaceable (Shaw & Lee, 2015). For some people, romantic love might be an indispensable part of sexuality. For others, it may be ridiculous to pair the two. Sexuality may also include **emotional intimacy**, or sharing aspects of the self with others with the goal of mutual understanding, but it isn't required. As we'll see, individuals as well as cultures demonstrate a wide variety of combinations of these aspects of sexuality and love.

Often, when we talk about sexuality, what we're really discussing is sexual identities. **Sexual identity** refers to the particular category into which people place themselves based on the current division of the world into heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, pansexuals, demisexuals, and asexuals. Sexual identity is how you label your own sexuality. In this chapter, we explore where the particular range of sexual identities available to people have emerged and evolved historically. As with other identities such as race and gender, the important question for sociologists is not why someone is gay or asexual but where those particular sets of options came from and what their implications are for our social lives.

This leaves us with the last term to define: *sexual attraction*. This term is perhaps the most difficult. What exactly does it mean to feel sexual attraction? Is it the specific desire to be engaging in a sexual act, or is it more generally the way one feels in her or his body? Does sexual attraction have to be aimed at some particular person or thing—what Sigmund Freud would call the love object? Is sexual attraction best measured biologically (through pulse rate or blood flow to genitalia) or by asking someone whether he or she feels aroused?

These are just a few of the questions that make it so difficult to define sexual attraction, and we haven't even touched on how the categories of sex category, gender, and sexual identity complicate these questions. Is the sexual attraction experienced by cisgender men or cisgender women, trans men or trans women, nonbinary or agender people, or homosexuals or heterosexuals different? As the category of asexuality challenges us to consider, does everyone experience sexual desire? For our purposes, we define **sexual attraction** as a combination of objective physical responses and subjective psychological or emotional responses to some internal or external stimulus. Sexual desire certainly has a physical component, but as we will discuss in more depth, it can also be deeply influenced by our culture, which can instruct us on when, where, and with whom it is appropriate to feel sexual attraction.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Come up with your own definitions of sex and sexuality. Do your definitions emphasize feelings, identity, emotions, behaviors, or some combination of all of the above? Is gender or sex category a part of your definition?*

## DOES SEXUALITY HAVE A GENDER?

In his essay on the relationship between gender, sex, and sexuality, John Stoltenberg (2006) begins by imagining a world without sex categories or gender. In this world, the inhabitants emphasize the way in which every person is unique—unique in their genitalia, their particular mixture of hormones, their DNA, and their reproductive capability. When a baby is born in this imaginary world, there is no announcement—"It's a boy" or "It's a girl"—that emphasizes membership in a particular category of people who are presumed to be alike.

Rather, any newborn with an especially rare mixture of chromosomes or genitalia or hormones is celebrated as yet another indication of how unique every individual is. Although in this world, individuals are born with a wide range of different types of genital tissue, the inhabitants emphasize the common origins of all of these different organs in a prenatal nub of embryonic tissue called a genital tubercle. Thinking in this vein, these individuals are likely to focus on the fact that what someone else felt in their genital tubercle is probably similar to what they feel in their own genital tubercle because their common origins mean that all these types of organs are wired in fairly similar ways.

In Stoltenberg's (2006) imaginary world, then, there are no sex categories. There are no males with penises or females with vaginas or intersex people who don't fit into either category. There are just unique people who are each different from the others in a broad variety of ways. What does sex itself look like in this world without sex categories? The individuals in this world *have* sex without having *a* sex category. They have "rolling and rollicking and robust sex, and sweaty and slippery and sticky sex, and trembling and quaking and tumultuous sex, and tender and tingling and transcendent sex" (p. 254). They have sex that involves their genital tubercles

but also sex that involves many other body parts. They have fingertip-to-fingertip sex, belly-to-belly sex. The possibilities are endless.

What is important in Stoltenberg's imaginary world is that in their erotic lives, these people are not acting out their status in any particular category when they have sex. The act of sex is not how they create the idea of gender. They are not required to act in feminine or masculine ways while they are having sex; they are free to simply be themselves as genuine individuals. This is how Stoltenberg imagines sex would be for people who were not males or females, masculine or feminine.

The trick in Stoltenberg's (2006) description is that everything he describes about the biology and anatomy of his inhabitants is true for us in *this* world; the difference is in how we make sense of those biological realities. As we read in Chapter 4, we all begin this world with genital tubercles in the womb, and the same basic material makes up the genitals everyone ends up with. There's a great deal of variation in chromosomal sex (XX, XY, but also XXY and XO) and in the relative amount of different types of hormones in our bodies. Everyone on this planet is unable to reproduce for some period of their lives (for everyone before puberty; and for those of us lucky to live long enough, we will become infertile again as we age), and so the wide variations in who can and cannot reproduce are not a consistent basis for distinction. Onto the same biological reality, those of us in Anglo-European societies impose two distinct and discrete categories, and we make a whole host of assumptions about what it means to be in those categories, including what it means to be in those categories sexually. Stoltenberg attempts to explore what sex would be like in such a world and, in the process, implies what sex *is* like in our world with sex categories and gender.

Namely, Stoltenberg and other gender scholars argue that having sex is one of the ways in which we create the idea that there is such a thing as sex categories and gender. We create the idea of gender in part through our expectations about what it means to be sexually a woman or a man. This might be a strange way to think about sex at first, but Stoltenberg (2006) argues that because sex categories and gender are not real, we have to act in ways that make them feel like something real, and having sex is one way in which we accomplish that. This should sound familiar as a good example of a doing-gender perspective. In this theoretical perspective, gender is omnirelevant, which means we're performing gender all the time and even in the most intimate of settings. Having sex becomes a way in which to create an accountable performance of gender.

## Heteronormativity and Compulsive Heterosexuality

Stoltenberg's (2006) point is one that's important to our understanding of the connections among sex category, gender, and sexuality. Children who are bullied for being "gay" are often being teased not for any expression of same-sex sexual desire. Rather, they are singled out for their gender nonconformity. Boys are called "sissy" and "fag" because they read books, are nice, don't like looking at pornography, like certain kinds of music, or walk with a certain "swish." Does this list of activities have anything to do with whom a boy wants to have sex with, or is it actually about his gender performance?

In Anglo-European societies, this clear link between gender and heterosexuality is taken for granted. This is part of what we mean when we talk about heteronormativity. **Heteronormativity**

is the way in which heterosexuality is viewed as the normal, natural way of being. If you are heterosexual, you may have never spent much time thinking about the ways in which your society is structured based on an assumed heterosexual norm. The Heterosexual Questionnaire is a list of questions that highlights heteronormativity by taking questions often directed at homosexual people and turning them on their head (Rochlin, 1972). Take a look at the first nine questions from the questionnaire that follows. The first question asks, "What do you think caused your heterosexuality?" This is a question that gay and lesbian people get asked frequently, but it is not one many straight people have ever considered. This question shows how homosexuality is something that needs to be explained while heterosexuality simply is.

There are several other assumptions about homosexuality that the questionnaire powerfully reveals. Question 5 showcases how we often believe that gays and lesbians would be straight if they only gave heterosexual sex a try. In Question 7, we see the fear some people have that queer people would like to change the sexual orientation of others. Question 8 raises an interesting issue—do straight people flaunt their heterosexuality? What would it mean to do so?

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?
3. Is it possible your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?
4. Could it be that your heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear of others of the same sex?
5. If you've never slept with a person of the same sex, how can you be sure you wouldn't prefer that?
6. To whom have you disclosed your heterosexual tendencies? How did they react?
7. Why do heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into their lifestyle?
8. Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality? Can't you just be what you are and keep it quiet?
9. Would you want your children to be heterosexual, knowing the problems they'd face?

One potential answer to the first question in the questionnaire, what causes heterosexuality, is the concept of compulsive heterosexuality. **Compulsive heterosexuality** describes the way in which heterosexuality becomes institutionalized into the practices of daily life and therefore enforced as a way of regulating our behaviors and distributing power and privilege (Pascoe, 2007). The concept of compulsive heterosexuality comes from an essay by Adrienne Rich (1986/1993), who used compulsive heterosexuality to explain the ways in which heterosexuality as an institution serves to ensure male physical, emotional, and economic access to women. In her essay, Rich identified the important role played by sexuality in reinforcing gender inequality. **Cisheteropatriarchy** describes these interconnections between gender identity, gender inequality, and sexuality, or the ways in which the dominance associated with a gender binary system also presumes heterosexuality as a social norm (Shaw & Lee, 2015).

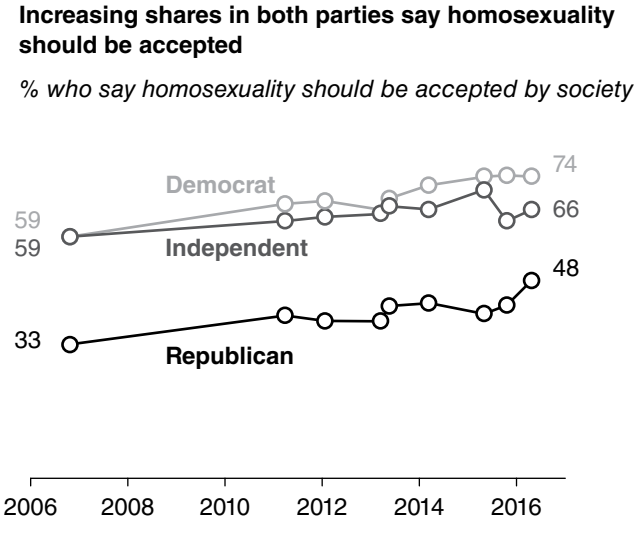
Figure 5.1 explores how heteropatriarchy is reflected in changing attitudes toward homosexuality.

As we have already begun to explore, sexuality is deeply gendered, and therefore, heterosexuality as an institution does not serve the exact same purpose when enforced on men as it does when enforced on women. The important premise of compulsory heterosexuality is that sexuality is more than just individual dispositions or behaviors; rather, it is an institution. As an institution, heterosexuality has the power to dictate norms (to be masculine is to be heterosexual) and to distribute power and privilege (those who are heterosexual have powers and privileges not available to those who are not). Compulsive heterosexuality for women may be about men maintaining their power over women, but for men, compulsive heterosexuality is more about men maintaining access to their power *as* men. Being called a fag is dangerous because it is not just about a boy's sexual identity or sexual desire but also about his *masculinity*. If heterosexuality is a social institution, then it has a history we can explore.

## A Brief History of Heterosexuality

It may seem strange to talk about a history of heterosexuality. Surely, heterosexuality is as old as human society and therefore requires no explanation. This is, in fact, the approach many early social scientists took in their study of sexuality from a social perspective. The study of sex, or **sexology**, traditionally focused on heterosexuality but not in any way that suggested heterosexuality was not the natural state of being (Nagel, 2003). Early sexology was divided into two main tasks: documenting the practices of heterosexuals, not to demonstrate how heterosexuality is socially constructed but rather to establish the boundaries of "normal" and "abnormal"

**FIGURE 5.1 ■ Changes in Attitudes Toward Homosexuality in the United States by Political Party, 2006–2016**




*Source:* Pew Research Center.

sexuality; and studying "deviant" sexualities, including homosexuality (Nagel, 2003). In this formulation, homosexuality is the phenomenon that needs to be explained, while heterosexuality is the taken-for-granted norm.

There are many problems with this particular approach to sexuality, including that it falls into the same trap we discussed in Chapter 2 in relation to the sociological approach to gender in sociology before the influence of feminism. Shifting attention to an examination of heterosexuality as opposed to "deviant" sexualities is another example of "studying up." As with the study of masculinity, beginning our examination by asking "Why heterosexuality?" reminds us that there is a reason some categories are perceived as normal and natural and, therefore, unnecessary to explain.

### The Invention of Heterosexuality

Beginning with a history of heterosexuality is also important because there was no such thing as heterosexuality in Anglo-European society until the 19th century. Neither was there anything called homosexuality. You may find this hard to believe until you understand an important distinction many historians of sexuality make between the words *heterosexual* and *homosexual* and all they have come to represent as compared with the actual sexual behaviors in which people engage. People have always engaged in different-gender sexual behavior, but no one until about 1886 would have labeled this behavior an example of heterosexuality or the people engaged in such behavior as heterosexuals. Similarly, evidence indicates that same-gender sexual behavior is common across many historical time periods and cultures, but no one would have labeled a person engaging in same-gender sexual behavior a homosexual until about 120 years ago. *Heterosexuality* comes into the English language at the same time as its counterpart, *homosexuality*, because the two terms make no sense without each other. The two terms were made popular by a sexologist, Richard Krafft-Ebing, who wrote about homosexuality as a personality disorder in his book, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published in 1886.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 5.1

### WHAT DOES DISNEY TEACH US ABOUT HETEROSEXUALITY?

Heteronormativity is something that is taught in Anglo-European society and absorbed at a young age by children. Where do they learn that heterosexuality is normal and what exactly heterosexuality is all about? Parents, teachers, and peers send subtle and not-so-subtle messages about sexuality. The media is also an important source of information about what it means to be sexual. In their content analysis of children's G-rated films, Karin A. Martin and Emily Kazyak (2009) found that the depiction of heterosexuality on the big screen is complicated along gender and racial lines. Only 2 of the 20 films in their sample did not have significant hetero-romantic references. In these hetero-romantic narratives, heterosexuality is depicted as both magical and natural. Mrs. Pots—a character in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*—tells Belle that if a "spark" is there, all that needs to be done is to "let nature take its course." The magical nature of hetero-romantic love is depicted in cartoons by literal

sparks, leaves, or fireworks that occur while the characters stare into each other's eyes or kiss for the first time. Same-sex friendships for girls in these movies are rare unless the friends are mother figures, while lead male characters are often paired with comic buddies. Even more interesting is the depiction of the heterosexual gaze in these films. Women in animated features are drawn with cleavage, bare stomachs, and bare legs. Women of color are more likely to be depicted as grown women with large breasts and ample hips, while white women are imagined as delicate girls. There are many scenes where women are "almost caught" naked and men are depicted ogling women's bodies, often the bodies of women of color. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the dark-skinned gypsy, Esmerelda, performs a dance in front of the cathedral that resembles a striptease. There are fewer examples in Martin and Kazyak's sample of white women characters being depicted as "sexy." Overall, these films send the message that sexiness is something women possess and use for getting men's attention. The researchers reveal that although we may think G-rated movies are free of sexual content, there are actually explicit messages being sent about the naturalness of heterosexuality and the particular sexual roles of women and men. Can you think of other messages about heterosexuality in children's movies?

This distinction between the actual term *heterosexuality* and sexual behavior between two people different genders may seem a bit, well, nitpicky. Kraft-Ebbing and others writing about sexuality in the 19th century may not have given things the same names, but how important is the name we give to something after all? Would heterosexuality by any other name be the same, to paraphrase Shakespeare? Language *is* important when we take a look at the ways that existed before the late 19th century for describing this range of sexual behaviors. Sexual relations between two men before 1886 would have been called *buggery* or *sodomy*, and one of the first laws in Anglo-European history to address same-gender behavior was passed by Henry VIII in 1533; it condemned all acts of buggery as being "against nature" (Weeks, 1996). The law was not designed to address same-gender behavior specifically, though; acts of buggery were defined as any acts that were "against nature," regardless of whether they were between man and woman, man and beast, or man and man.

This means that a man and a woman engaging in a sexual behavior that was considered against nature (usually anal sex) was defined as buggery. If people engaging in a sexual act that we would now call heterosexual were perceived as committing buggery, then buggery really does not mean the same thing as homosexuality at all. As with ancient Greek society, these buggery laws reflect a system for categorizing sexuality that is not based primarily on sex category or gender. What do same-gender sexual behaviors, bestiality, and anal sex all have in common that would warrant them being placed in the same category? They are all forms of nonprocreative sex, meaning that they cannot lead to the birth of a child. For much of Anglo-European history, the division between procreative and nonprocreative sex was one of the most important distinctions, and it therefore makes sense that categories of importance (buggery versus legal and acceptable types of sex) reflected these divisions.

### One Sex or Two?

What does this tell us about the sex category and gender system as well as the distribution of power in these historical societies? Many historians of gender and sexuality suggest that the fact

that categories of sexuality were not based on sex category or gender reflects a different view of these phenomena. As we discussed in Chapter 1, for much of Anglo-European society, the predominant view of women and men was a one-gender model rather than our current two-gender model. The one-gender model of sex categories comes from the ancient Greeks and views women not as a completely different type of creature but as an inferior version of men. From this perspective, women are not fundamentally different from men, but they are merely inferior versions of men, just as men are inferior versions of the gods. If women are just inferior versions of men rather than completely different types of beings, then making distinctions based on the sex category of whom you have sex with makes little sense.

In the current **two-gender model**, women and men are believed to be two completely different types of people, and sex categories are viewed as discrete (you're either male or female, and there's nothing in between). The one-gender model helps us to understand the way in which distinctions based on sexual behavior were made for much of Anglo-European history, as well as how power was distributed. In the one-gender model, women are still considered to be at the bottom of the hierarchy, although the hierarchy itself may be differently shaped. For this reason, categories of sexuality focused almost exclusively on the behavior of men. This is not to say that same-gender sexual behavior didn't happen between women but that women's sexual behavior with other women was considered largely unimportant. Most important in this model of understanding sexuality was not the sex category of the person you were having sex with but where that person was on the hierarchy and whether you took the appropriately dominant role in sexual activity.

## Sexuality in Cross-Cultural Perspective

If we've already established that the idea of heterosexuality and homosexuality is a relatively recent historical invention of the Anglo-European world, then it probably follows that these concepts are unique to the Anglo-European world as well. In the areas of gay and lesbian studies, feminist scholarship, and queer theory, research investigates how other cultures conceive of sexuality and the particular categories they create to classify types of sexual behavior. Although initially, these projects were often described as searching for examples of homosexuality or homosexual behavior in other cultures, more recent work focuses on same-gender sexual behavior instead. This acknowledges that given different cultures with their own unique systems for organizing sex categories, gender, and sexuality, the terms *homosexuality* and *heterosexuality* very well may not make sense. These terms presume a network of relationships and ways of understanding sex category, gender, and sexuality that, as we will discuss, are simply not true for many other cultures. Given the amazing variety in the types of cultures found around the world, it shouldn't be surprising to find a great deal of diversity in the particular forms of sexuality that exist.

Cross-cultural research on same-sex sexual behavior has found that social status in the form of age is often important in dictating appropriate and inappropriate forms of sexual behavior. A practice common among an entire grouping of cultures ranging from Papua New Guinea to some Australian Aborigine tribes to the Solomon Islands is a *boy-inseminating ritual* (Herdt, 1997). Among the Sambia of New Guinea, this ritual is an important part of boys' transition from childhood to adulthood. The Sambia believe that semen is a crucial substance for fertility and reproduction. Not only is

semen what obviously results in the conception of a baby, but semen is also believed to have the magical power to transform itself into mother's milk. The Sambians also believe that although women are born with the important *feminine* reproductive fluids—breast milk and menstrual blood—men are not born with semen. For the Sambians, the male body does not naturally create semen, and therefore, semen must be provided by an outside source. The boy-inseminating ritual serves this purpose, and it involves oral sex between younger and older boys (between the ages of 10 and 15).

This same-gender sexual behavior is highly structured by strict ritual rules. Boys begin engaging in the behavior after undergoing an initial purification ritual to have their "feminine" traces removed. They are then ready to be initiated into masculinity by performing oral sex on older boys and, thus, becoming semen recipients. When they enter puberty, they switch from being semen recipients to becoming semen donors as the next group of younger boys performs oral sex on them. Young Sambian men engage in this behavior until they are married, and at that point, same-gender sexual behavior ends for most Sambian men. These rituals, which the Sambians believe are crucial to the very reproduction of themselves as a people, are kept secret from women, who may have little idea of the content of these behaviors. Undergoing these rituals is what allows Sambian men to become husbands and, eventually, fathers. Engaging in same-gender sexual behavior for Sambian boys is what allows them to become truly masculine.

Another interesting system for categorizing sexual behavior comes from many North American Native cultures. The **two-spirit** role, with some variations, existed across a wide range of Native American communities and cultures. Within various Native American tribal groups, the exact term for the two-spirit varied, and the term more commonly involved men than it did women. A person became a two-spirit in different ways depending on the norms of the particular community, but the status usually followed from some expressed preference for cross-gender behavior. This could be expressed voluntarily on the part of a young boy or girl who showed more interest in learning the traditional activities of the other gender. Two-spirits were also sometimes identified through tests of infants or small children in which some characteristically masculine and feminine implements were set in front of the child. If the child chose the particular implement of a different gender, he or she became a two-spirit and was raised as the opposite gender. A male two-spirit would dress as a woman, perform all the tribal duties associated with women, and, in some cases, have sexual relations with or marry a man. A male two-spirit, for all purposes, became a social woman within the community, even though she was anatomically still male. Although some early anthropologists assumed that two-spirits must actually be intersex individuals, this was not the case.

The status of two-spirits within Native American communities varied. Among the Navajo, Cheyenne, and Mojave, two-spirits were believed to have exceptional abilities as matchmakers, love magicians, or curers of venereal diseases (Whitehead, 1981). The two-spirits had special ritual functions among the Crow, Papago, and Cheyenne. Male two-spirits were also sometimes stigmatized as being cowards or as less than a full man. Their role within the societies, regardless of its particular content, was a well-established, taken-for-granted part of Native American culture. Two-spirits were not perceived as "freaks" or as existing outside the norms of Native American societies but simply as filling one particular social niche in the fabric of their larger society. The most important part of their identity was their particular gender, and against this identity, their sexual behaviors were considered unimportant.

The cases of two-spirits and boy-inseminating rituals demonstrate the many unique forms of sexuality across human history and cultures, including many distinct ways of thinking about same-sex sexual behavior. A more extensive survey would direct us to the mahu among native Hawaiian cultures in the United States (Matzner, 2001); the *bichas, viados*, or *travestis* of Brazil (Nanda, 2000); the kathoeys of Thailand (Nanda, 2000); the sworn virgins of the Balkans (Nanda, 2000); and the hijras of India (Nanda, 1998). In ancient Japan, samurai warriors took younger male lovers called *nenja* (Herdt, 1997). Among the Basotho people of Africa, women engaged in "mummy-baby" relationships, which involved a public ritual celebrating a bond between two women that might include emotional exclusivity, kissing, body rubbing, and genital contact (Gay, 1989). The only commonality among all these categories is some sexual behavior between individuals of the same gender. Beyond that, some of these relationships exist alongside heterosexual marriage, as in the mummy-baby relationships in Africa. Others of these individuals, like the hijras of India, are isolated in communities of others like themselves and therefore do not participate in societal institutions such as marriage. In some instances, same-gender sexual behavior is considered perfectly consistent with one's gender role, as in the case of the samurai and the Sambia. Engaging in these same-gender relationships, for men, reinforced rather than threatened their masculinity. In other cases, as in some instances of two-spirits, gender identity did come into question.

Table 5.1 gives a glimpse of the varying ways different cultures and historical time periods have understood same-sex sexual behavior.

**TABLE 5.1 ■ Cross-Cultural and Historical Meanings of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior**

| Country/Historical Time Period | Meaning of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior |
|---|---|
| Latin America | In some Latin American societies, men having sex with other men are considered homosexual only if they are the "receiving" partner, not the penetrating partner. |
| North America—Hawaii | The mahu in native Hawaiian culture are men who live as women; they have ceremonial importance, and though they may have sex with other men, they are not considered homosexual. |
| North America—Native Americans | Two-spirits among various Native American tribes might marry or have sexual relations with people of the same sex; two-spirits had ceremonial importance and spiritual abilities in some tribes. |
| North America—19th Century | A Boston marriage described two unmarried women sharing a household; historical records suggest that the women felt a close emotional connection to each other and lived in many ways as a married couple, though it's hard to know if these relationships included sexual behavior. |

(*Continued*)

**TABLE 5.1 ■ Cross-Cultural and Historical Meanings of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior (*Continued*)**

| Country/Historical Time Period | Meaning of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior |
|---|---|
| India | The hijras of India are men who live as women, sometimes removing their male genitalia; they have sex with other men but are considered a third sex, neither man nor woman. |
| Ancient Greece | Same-sex sexual behavior between men was accepted unless it violated the established social hierarchy; older men having younger male lovers was seen as an expression of a man's power and status. |
| Lesotho, Africa | "Mummy-baby" relationships between adolescent women are sanctioned; though they may involve extended kissing, body rubbing, emotional exclusivity, and genital contact, they are not considered sexual, as sex occurs only with a penis. |
| Papua, New Guinea | Young boys perform ritualized oral sex on older men in order to initiate them into masculinity; this ritual is what turns boys into men. |

### Mixing It Up: Sex Category, Gender, and Sexuality

The important lesson to take away from all of these different cases is that there is nothing given about the particular relationship among sex category, gender, and sexuality that is presumed in current Anglo-European society. Although many of the explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists who initially provided the accounts of these sexual behaviors and institutions tried to subsume them into their existing paradigm, they simply did not fit. Are the Sambia, two-spirits, mahu, hijras, and samurai all groups of "homosexuals"? To answer yes would be to engage in a classic act of ethnocentrism. **Ethnocentrism** is seeing one's own culture as better, more correct, or right relative to another culture. Clearly, in the dominant Anglo-European view of sexuality, many of these same-sex sexual behaviors seem to be homosexual. But labeling them as such is ethnocentric because it views the Anglo-European way of understanding sexual behavior as *the* correct way. If we simply label these behaviors as homosexual, we ignore the ways in which these behaviors are firmly grounded in a cultural context very different from that of Anglo-European cultures, including different ways of conceiving of sex categories and gender.

## MEASURING SEXUALITY: WHAT IS SEXUAL IDENTITY?

It's all very good and fine to look at how other cultures and other time periods understand the relationships among sex category, gender, and sexuality. It's not difficult to demonstrate that the categories of homosexual and heterosexual are socially constructed. But they still have a social reality in Anglo-European culture. What are the rules for these socially constructed categories?

The modern American history of the scientific research of sexuality begins at Indiana University with Alfred Kinsey. Kinsey, a biologist by training who studied gall wasps before taking up an interest in human sexuality, undertook research in the 1940s to find out what people do, sexually speaking (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953). After surveying a large sample of American women and men, Kinsey published two volumes on human sexuality, the first focusing on sexual behavior in the human male and the second on the sexuality of human females. The picture of sexuality that Kinsey revealed was disturbing to many because it did not fit into a neat picture of gay or straight. Because Kinsey was interested in the balance of homosexual and heterosexual behaviors within individuals, he asked them about their activities and thoughts rather than about their sexual identity.

The result of Kinsey's research was the Kinsey scale, a new way of measuring sexual behavior. Focusing on thoughts and behaviors, Kinsey proposed that human sexuality was best described as not discrete categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality but as a continuum. According to the scale, at one end, a person is exclusively heterosexual, and at the other, exclusively homosexual. Kinsey found that most of his subjects fit somewhere in between, having had some same-sex and opposite-sex behavior or desire.

Kinsey's research, especially his volume on female sexuality, was controversial, and there was little in the way of scientific research on sexuality until the 1990s, when sociologist E. O. Laumann took another look at human sexual behavior (Laumann et al., 1994). Consistent with Kinsey, Laumann found little consistency between how people identified their sexual identity, their sexual behaviors, and their sexual desires. Some of the people in his survey had same-sex desires and had engaged in same-sex behaviors, but they did not identify themselves as gay. Others had had same-sex encounters but reported neither a **homosexual identity** (self-identifying as gay or lesbian) nor having same-sex desire. This research, like that of Kinsey 40 years earlier, points to the fact that sexuality is a multidimensional phenomenon and therefore difficult to measure.

Herein lies the problem in scientific studies that search for a "cause" of homosexuality, whether that cause be genetic, hormonal, psychological, social, or some combination of all of the above (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). We've just demonstrated that these concepts are specific to a particular culture and time period rather than being universal. So the first problem is figuring out who in your study will be considered "homosexual" and who will be considered "heterosexual." If you want to include "bisexual" as a category, or "asexual," you introduce even more complications.

Perhaps the best solution is to acknowledge that there might be not just 2 or 3 or 10 categories of sexual identity, but infinite possibilities. A Buzzfeed list playfully suggests 50 sexual orientations that should exist if they don't already (Karlan, 2014). A small sample of the list includes bottomless mimosas, the entire cast of *Orange Is the New Black*, any time Laverne Cox gives a speech, binge-watching *Buffy*, and Chris Tucker in *The Fifth Element*. The list is mostly intended for humor, but it begins to suggest the potential that comes from unhooking sexuality from any hard-and-fast connection to gender. Perhaps the best way to conceive of sexuality is that everyone has their own unique sexual identity. Or perhaps sexual identity is constantly shifting. My sexuality on Monday might be bottomless mimosas but, on Tuesday, switch to Chris Tucker in *The Fifth Element*.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of your own sexual orientations that should exist but don't to add to the list? Could your sexual orientation change over time? Could your sexual orientation vary day by day or even hour by hour?*

### Men as Sexual Subjects

We might be moving toward an understanding of infinite sexual identities, but in our current system, the links between gender and sexuality are still important for how women and men experience sexuality. Men are perceived as powerful **sexual subjects**, meaning they have a sense of power and agency in their own bodies that allows them to *act in* their bodies rather than being *acted on* (Martin, 1996). It's assumed that men will have strong sexual desires, whether they are soldiers in a foreign country or boys in middle school and high school. One example of men as sexual subjects is from Joane Nagel's (2003) book about the connections among sexuality, ethnicity, and race. She describes the *military-sexual complex* as part of the ways in which sex itself is militarized. Providing sex for soldiers is an essential part of how armies motivate men to fight, while rape committed during war is a way to create solidarity among troops through creating mutual guilt. What assumptions about masculine sexuality underlie phenomena like the military-sexual complex?

One assumption is that men have a need for sex so great that they can be motivated to do things like kill and die partly in exchange for ready access to sex. Certainly, the provision of women and prostitutes is not the only or the main reason soldiers fight and die, but the militarization of sex suggests a belief that the sexual desire of men is a pressing need that must be met. In encouraging and sometimes sanctioning the network of sex-work institutions that surround military bases, governments are treating the provision of sex as just one more basic need of their armies that they are obligated to provide. Armies, historically and still primarily composed of men, quite simply *need* sex. That UN peacekeepers would solicit young, female prostitutes is considered just something that men do, and it is therefore excusable under the expression "Boys will be boys." Within this particular cultural framework, the assumption is that the sexual desire of men is, at the very least, greater than that of women and, at the most extreme, powerful, natural, and beyond control. Men are considered sexual beings, although in a way very different from that of women.

As we'll discuss later, women are also considered sexual beings, but they are more likely to be sexualized and made into sexual objects. Being a sexual subject seems like a good thing because it becomes a source of power and agency for men. Rape as a weapon of war, although rarely discussed, is part of the way in which sexuality is used to gain or reinforce power. In this most extreme version of sexual subjectivity, men act on the bodies of women or other men, and these bodies become like the physical territory over which battles are fought.

But the last lesson about masculinity and sexuality to be learned from these stories is that the power of sexual subjectivity and sexual desire also comes with a price. The presumption of

men's strong sexual desires puts sometimes unrealistic expectations on men, and the connection between sex and power may deprive men of the ability to have different kinds of intimate connections. As explored by Susan Bordo (1999), if a penis is really like a power tool, then it should also be expected to perform like one; it's relatively easy to turn on and should function perfectly until someone turns it off. If it's "broken," it should easily be fixed. To admit that maybe your own sexual desire doesn't work like that is to be perceived as abnormal and defective or even as literally powerless. If so much of masculinity is defined in current Anglo-European societies through sexual desire and sexual performance, this is bound to create some pressure on the actual men who live in those societies.

In addition, to describe masculine sexuality using machine metaphors implies a disconnect between sexuality and other aspects of what it means to be human. A machine does not require warmth, trust, affection, respect, love, or connection to function. And a machine exists only to serve a function or accomplish a task. What does it mean to think about having sex in these ways? Are we to believe that the act of sex, for men, is really so devoid of any connections to other emotions? Is sex, for men, really merely a performance, perhaps to be judged good or bad, but existing outside any larger context or relationship? In his essay on sexuality, Stoltenberg (2006) argued that men are deprived of the opportunity to experience sex as something more than just a performance of masculinity because of their need to have *a* sex through having sex. Sexual subjectivity may be a source of power for men, but many would argue that it can also create pressures and place limits on masculine sexuality.

## Women as Sexual Objects

If men are seen as sexual subjects, the dominant framework for women's sexuality is one of sexual objectification. To view oneself as a **sexual object** is just that—to see oneself as the passive recipient of sexual behavior and sexual desire or to be the one who is sexually acted on and sexually desired rather than the one doing the sexual acting and sexual desiring.

This dynamic is revealed in research on how young women understand their first sexual experiences. In her own study of the experiences of boys and girls at puberty and with their first sexual encounter, Karin A. Martin (1996) found that many of the girls she interviewed saw sex as something that happened to them rather than as something they actively desired and pursued. Many of the girls in Martin's study experienced pressure to have sex with their boyfriends to maintain the relationship. Martin described adolescent girls as experiencing ideal love with their first boyfriends. **Ideal love** is "submission to and adoration of an idealized other whom one would like to be like and from whom one wants confirmation and recognition" (Martin, 1996, p. 61).

As you might imagine, being the object of ideal love gives these adolescent boys a great deal of control. Many adolescent boys in Martin's study looked forward to having sex for the first time and saw this as an important accomplishment, especially among their male peers. These dynamics paired adolescent boys who were eager to have sex with adolescent girls who were often quite reluctant and anxious about having sex but who idolized their boyfriends because of ideal love. When adolescent girls anticipated what their first sexual experiences would be like, the expectations of the majority centered on potential pain and fear. In these relationships, boys

who were eager and excited about having sex pressured their girlfriends, who were reluctant if not scared about having sex.

When Martin asked her female teenage respondents why it was hard for some girls to say no when they didn't really want to have sex, they gave answers like, "'Cause the boys break up with you or something like that. Or they say, 'You don't love me'" (Martin, 1996, p. 73). Ideal love for their boyfriends leads many adolescent girls to have sex out of fear of losing their boyfriends, and given these motives, it's not surprising that the experience of first sex is often not pleasant for these girls. The girls in Martin's study told stories about not just the physical discomfort of their first sexual experiences but also about the psychological and emotional confusion they experienced afterward.

In part because of these dynamics, when the adolescent girls in Martin's (1996) study described their first sexual encounter, they often described the event as something that happened to them rather than as something they made an active decision to do. Several girls in Martin's study used the exact same phrase when they described how they decided to have sex—"it just happened." For example, here's Elaine explaining how she decided to have sex with her boyfriend:

> It just happened really. I mean, I didn't want to 'cause I couldn't ever picture myself having sex, but umm, all my friends did, and umm, so it just happened and he was my first so . . . I thought it was right cause we were going out for two years before we did. (Martin, 1996, p. 72)

This is in line with what Martin (1996) found about adolescent girls' attitudes toward their bodies in general. In their descriptions of their experiences of puberty, girls felt their physical bodies were something separate from them and often outside their own control. Rather than a source of pleasure, their bodies were often sources of pain, shame, embarrassment, and disappointment. These experiences combined to make girls much less likely than boys to *act in* their bodies and more likely to view their bodies as things that were *acted on*. One facet of feminine sexuality, then, is to be seen as passive—as the object of sexual desire rather than the active pursuer of sexual pleasure.

## Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Feminine Sexuality

Other studies have confirmed Martin's findings about young women and sexual subjectivity, though most of them focus on women in North America (Schalet, 2009; Tolman, 2002). But the degree to which girls learn to see themselves as sexual subjects varies by the cultures in which they find themselves and the messages they receive about their bodies. In one cross-cultural study of girls' early sexual experiences, Amy Schalet finds important differences in how Dutch and American girls understand themselves as sexual subjects (Schalet, 2010).

Among the Dutch girls in Schalet's study, access to and information about birth control was much easier to obtain. Dutch parents were more helpful in assisting their daughters in getting access to birth control, and much of what it meant to be "ready" to have sex revolved around their ability to use birth control. American families were more likely to not mention birth control at all to their daughters or, if they did, to give the impression that if their daughter expressed a need for contraception, parents would "freak out" (Schalet, 2010, p. 315).

In general, the sexuality of American girls, even in fairly liberal families, is either denied or seen as potentially problematic. Certainly, few American parents respond to their daughters' stories of sexual activity the way Natalie's Dutch parents did. Not only were her parents not shocked, her father said, "Sixteen (Natalie's age at the time) is a beautiful age" (314). Her mother said about the prospect of Natalie having sex that she "thought it was really great."

These comments demonstrate that for many Dutch families, daughters' sexual maturation becomes integrated into their overall relationship with their parents. There is no tension, as exists for American parents, between daughters' needs to be seen as "good girls" and their ability to become sexual subjects. This contrast is most striking in Dutch attitudes to boyfriends sleeping over or their daughters sleeping over at their boyfriends' houses. Though not all Dutch parents are open to sleepovers, daughters anticipate that with the right relationship or once they've reached a certain age (18), their parents will allow their boyfriend to sleep over, giving both acknowledgment and approval of their sexual relationship. American parents, on the other hand, balk at the idea of such a clear recognition of their daughters' sexuality. Schalet also finds that the specter of the "slut" label looms much larger for American girls than for their Dutch counterparts. Being labeled a "slut" still happens in Dutch culture but is much less frequent. This is due to two beliefs that Dutch girls absorb from the larger culture. The first belief is that within a well-functioning, steady relationship, sex is permissible for girls. A girl who has sex as part of a one-night stand might be looked down upon, but a girl in a steady relationship will not be.

The second reason the slut discourse doesn't have as much power in Dutch culture is that both parents and children believe that teenagers can fall in love and form the kind of relationships in which sex is legitimate. These relationships may be more experimental than those of older adults, but they're not discounted or viewed as impossible, as is true in much of American culture. If teenagers in the Netherlands can fall in love and have legitimate relationships, they're also capable of making mature, informed decisions about their sexual lives.

## The Double Standard

The controlling image of the slut discourse reveals one of the important consequences of women as sexual objects rather than as sexual subjects—the double standard. The **double standard** is a cultural belief in Anglo-European society that the exact same sexual behaviors or feelings are OK for one gender (men) but not for the other (women). This usually means that it's considered OK for men to think more about sex, have more sex, have more casual sex, and have more nonmarital sex than it is for women to do so. You can see how the double standard connects back to the idea of women as sexual objects and men as sexual subjects. The double standard both reflects this belief and helps to maintain it by making for fewer social sanctions for men than for women when they engage in sexual behavior.

Thus, when adolescent girls have sex for the first time, the double standard tells them that they have done something wrong in a way that is not true for their male counterparts. Adolescent boys having sex is perfectly in line with gender expectations, but many girls must struggle with figuring out whether they have violated some important norm of what it means to be a girl or, at the very least, a "good" girl. In both American and Dutch culture,

the double standard has been modified somewhat in that girls are not considered sluts merely for the act of having sex. Rather, a slut is a girl who has sex with someone she doesn't love or who has sex when she is too young (generally perceived as having sex at the age of 12 or 13; Martin, 1996). Nonetheless, the double standard is an important aspect of gendered sexuality in that it discourages women from expressing and acting on their sexual desires while expecting men to do so.

## PLAYING THE PART? SEXUAL SCRIPTS

One way in which to understand the deeply social, and therefore gendered, nature of sexuality is to look at sexual scripts. Sexual scripts answer this important question: What exactly are we supposed to do, sexually speaking? **Sexual scripts** are the learned guidelines for sexual expression that provide individuals with a sense of appropriate sexual behaviors and sexual desires for their particular culture (Galliano, 2003). Sexual scripts can tell us both whom we should have sexual desire for or engage in sexual behavior with and what exactly we should do when we have sex, along with what we should feel and think. Sexual scripts are a concept firmly based in a social constructionist understanding of sexuality. The question is, when we get into the bedroom or whatever particular location is considered the appropriate venue for sexual activity (which is another part of sexual scripts), what do we actually do?

If you believe that sexuality is mostly the result of biology, then this isn't much of a question. Our sex drive or genes or hormones or anatomy tells us what to do, and there's no need for sexual scripts. The wide range of sexual behaviors that people *do* engage in suggests that there is, at the very least, some social dimension telling us what to do sexually. Where do these sexual scripts come from if they are not hardwired into our bodies? As our definition suggested, sexual scripts are derived from values and beliefs in the larger culture. Sexual scripts draw on beliefs about sexuality, but these intersect with beliefs about sex category, gender, and other hierarchical categories like age, class, and race.

### Grinding and Sexual Scripts on the College Dance Floor

In Anglo-European society, sexual scripts suggest that men should be the initiators of sexual behavior most of the time. In her study of grinding behaviors on the dance floors of college campuses, Shelly Ronen (2010) found that there were unspoken roles dictating this particular style of highly sexualized dancing. Grinding, also known as "freaking," "freak-dancing," "dirty dancing," "bumping," and "booty-dancing," is a kind of dancing associated with club culture and hip-hop, which dominates the college party scene. In her study, Ronen found that grinding was always heterosexual and most commonly involved a woman with her back against a man's torso, rubbing her buttocks into his groin. Face-to-face grinding was less common, but it involved women and men pushing their groins and chests into each other. At these parties, women would initially dance suggestively together in groups with other women. Men never danced with other groups of men or by themselves, as engaging in such behavior would potentially label them as homosexual.

In almost all the instances of grinding observed, men initiated the behavior. This usually happened nonverbally, with a man coming up behind a woman and beginning to grind against her. Women could refuse to accept this initiation of grinding behavior, but they almost always did so in ways that were communal and pleasant. For example, women might grab another female friend on the dance floor and begin dancing with her to disengage from a male partner. They would sometimes dance "limply," refusing to cooperate in the grinding behavior until the man gave up and walked away. Some would wait for the current song to end. In no cases did the researchers observe women confronting men directly with a rejection of their grinding advances.

In the few instances when women did ask a man to dance, the interaction usually ended quickly. The correct script for grinding, then, was for women to dance suggestively on the dance floor with other women until a man approached her to grind, most commonly sneaking up on her literally from behind. As the researchers point out, this behavior closely mirrors our own sexual scripts for gender and sexuality. Men are the active initiators of sexual activity. Women have the power to accept or reject their approaches but not the power to initiate them. When they do reject sexual advances, they must do so in a way that minimizes the potential embarrassment and discomfort for the men. In this context, men remain the sexual subjects and women the sexual objects.

## Sexuality in Islamic Perspectives

As cultural ideas about the connections among sex category, gender, and sexuality vary, sexual scripts will vary as well. Fatima Mernissi (2002) examined Muslim sexual scripts about male activity and female passivity. In Muslim traditions, sexual instincts in and of themselves are neither good nor bad. They exist and are understood without the kind of division between flesh and spirit made in Christianity, where the flesh is weak and sinful and the spirit is closer to God and therefore perfection. Sexual desire, in the Muslim tradition, when properly controlled by religious teachings, is good in that it can help to serve God's purpose in three important ways. Sex leads to procreation, thereby ensuring the continuance of the human race. Sex also serves as a "foretaste of the delights secured for men in Paradise" (p. 297), thereby providing incentive for men to follow the religious dictates of Islam.

Finally, sex helps to serve God's purpose in allowing for intellectual effort. According to some Islamic teachings discussed by Mernissi (2002), one of the most precious gifts given to humans by God is reason. For men to use this reason fully, they must reduce the tensions created by sexual desire both within and without their bodies and be able to avoid the distractions of indulging in earthly pleasures. Releasing these tensions through sexual activity allows men to avoid distractions and engage their reason. In these three ways, sex, from the Muslim, perspective is considered a part of God's plan rather than the work of the devil, as it is often considered in Christian traditions.

This particular sexual script, as explored by Mernissi (2002), says sex is a good thing. How does this sexual script vary for women and men? In Muslim theology, women's sexuality is not generally perceived as passive. Ali, the husband of the Prophet Muhammad's favorite daughter, Fatima, and the founder of Shiite Islam, said of sexuality and gender, "Almighty God created

sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one to men" (as quoted in Brooks, 1995). In other words, this creation story tells us that women got most of the cosmic share of desire to be doled out, nine-tenths of it to men's measly one-tenth. Women experience greater levels of sexual desire than men, and the writings of the Islamic scholar Ghazali, as studied by Mernissi (2002), confirm this view. In his instructions for husbands, Ghazali emphasized the important duty of a husband to satisfy his wife's or wives' sometimes overwhelming sexual desire; he considered it a husband's duty to meet his wife's sexual needs to preserve her virtue, because a woman who is not sexually satisfied by her husband will seek sexual gratification elsewhere. Ghazali recommended for the husband with four wives that he rotate between them so that each wife has sex once every four nights, although this schedule might need to be adjusted should the particular needs of his wives dictate.

If this weren't exhausting enough, Ghazali and the Prophet Muhammad both instructed men never to rush toward the act of sexual intercourse. Both Ghazali and Muhammad emphasized the importance of foreplay to marital relations, as in the following passage where Ghazali quotes Muhammad:

> The Prophet said, "No one among you should throw himself on his wife like beasts do. There should be, prior to coitus, a messenger between you and her." People asked him, "What sort of messenger?" The Prophet answered, "Kisses and words." (as quoted in Mernissi, 2002, p. 303)

Muhammad was once quoted in a discussion of what constitutes cruelty as giving intercourse without foreplay as an example (Brooks, 1995). In these passages, feminine sexuality is clearly perceived as active. Who wants sex more according to this particular formulation of Islamic thought? Women. Who gets to say what happens during sex? Islamic religious authorities seem to be instructing men to do what women want to satisfy them sexually. Within this perspective, women's pleasure in sex is as important as men's.

In fact, the idea that women's sexual desire greatly exceeds that of men is not at all unique to Islamic thought. In Greek mythology, the blind prophet Teiresias, who lived part of his life as a man and part as a woman, was asked to settle a dispute between the king of the gods, Zeus, and his wife, Hera, about who enjoyed the greater pleasure in sex or the better orgasm, women or men. Teiresias answered, "If the parts of love-pleasure be counted as ten, Thrice three go to women, one only to men" (Blackledge, 2009, p. 281). The number is eerily similar to that given by Fatima's husband in Islamic tradition, but the idea that women gain more pleasure from sex than men is also echoed in Hindu tradition. In the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, the powerful king Bhangasvana, like Teiresias, is turned into a woman by an angry god, Indra. Years later, Bhangasvana is forgiven by Indra and asked whether he would like to become a man again or remain a woman. Bhangasvana answers, "The woman has in union with man always greater joy, that is why . . . I choose to be a woman. I feel greater pleasure in love as a woman, that is the truth, best among the gods" (Blackledge, 2009, p. 281). Even the Old Testament in the Judeo-Christian tradition from the third century B.C. recognizes the power of female sexual desire with the following lines: "There are three things that are never sated . . . Hell, the mouth of the vulva, and the earth" (Blackledge, 2009, p. 281).

From this broader cultural and historical perspective, the sexual script in current Anglo-European society that women are passive sexually is something of an anomaly. Sexual scripts in other cultural traditions, as well as traditions (like the Bible) within Anglo-European society, view women's sexuality as much more active than men's. Why are our current ideas so different? Some feminists suggest that the idea of passive, feminine sexuality is an attempt to control women's power in society. In her study of adolescent girls, Martin (1996) argues that girls' first sexual experiences and their negative feelings about puberty explain the drop in self-esteem attributed to girls at around this age. Feeling like a sexual object and as if one's body is something beyond one's control has an effect on how girls think about themselves in general, not just sexually. Controlling a person's sexuality is therefore a means to control their own sense of agency and efficacy in the world, and perhaps this explains the existence of this particular sexual script.

The existence of sexual scripts provides strong support for the role of social life in influencing our sexuality. How might the experiences of the girls in Martin's (1996) study have been different if they had lived in a culture that saw women as sexually active rather than as passive, as sexual subjects rather than as sexual objects? As with gender itself, the exact ways in which we think about the sexuality of women and men depend a great deal on the cultural context in which we find ourselves. This is true of the ways in which gender affects how we think about sexuality in general and also for the ways in which our categories of sexuality depend on the existence of sex categories and gender.

## Stabane and Sexuality in South Africa

Can we ever escape the particular sexual scripts of sexual subjects and sexual objects? What happens to these dynamics in sexual interactions that do not involve biological men and biological women? Is that different from what might happen in sexual pairings that involve two people who are both masculine or both feminine? When two masculine individuals engage in sexual behavior, who is the sexual subject and who is the sexual object?

To answer these questions, let's consider the particular alignment of sex category, gender, and sexuality among Black South Africans. South Africa's constitution was the first in the world to offer protection to its citizens on the basis of sexual orientation, gender, and sex category. But this legal protection of gays and lesbians is complicated by the particular cultural understandings of sex category and sexuality. *Stabane* is a Zulu vernacular word used to describe an intersex individual (Swarr, 2009). Someone who is stabane is assumed to have both a penis and a vagina. However, in contemporary South Africa, the concept of stabane becomes conflated with homosexuality so that gays and lesbians are assumed to be intersex.

Gays and lesbians in South African townships who express same-sex desire are often forcibly examined to verify their status as stabane. One woman reports on her own experiences:

> They assumed that because I had proposed to the girl I must be a *stabane*, a hermaphrodite, with both male and female genitals. I was taken to a hut where a woman forced me to undress and examined me. When they discovered I was "normal" the chief ordered that I be lashed. (Swarr, 2009, p. 531)

The concept of stabane reflects that same-sex sexual desire must be located in some internal sex category abnormality.

These beliefs about the nature of homosexuality affect the particular sexual scripts followed by gays and lesbians in South Africa. In Soweto, having sex with someone of the same sex does not necessarily change how an individual might label her own sexual orientation or how others might label it. For example, straight women who have sex with a butch lesbian may not be considered lesbians themselves. When butch lesbians have sex with straight women, the stabane concept necessitates that they find a way to penetrate their female sexual partners because they are expected to have a penis. One butch lesbian in Soweto describes it this way:

> And one day she'll start a silly, confusing conversation, "Do you have a penis as well?" A woman can be shy like that. Thirdly, she'll maybe want you to just penetrate her, not to play around. You know this foreplay thing. And then if you don't do that as quick as she wants, she expects it, and then you are a failure in bed. (Swarr, 2009, p. 535)

In a similar vein, gay men might hide their penis or use smell and other means to convince their straight male sexual partners that they have a vagina.

In both of these instances, the particular sexual scripts associated with heterosexuality are replicated in the context of same-sex sexual interactions. Like men, butch lesbians are expected to take control of sexual interactions and penetrate their partners with little attention to foreplay. Gay men are penetrated by their straight male lovers. The stabane concept preserves the idea that even when men are having sex with men and women are having sex with women, these are still heterosexual interactions.

## VIOLATING THE SCRIPTS

If sexual scripts dictate that men are supposed to be sexual subjects and the initiators of sexual behavior, as we saw with grinding on the dance floor, what happens when men violate those scripts? Not all women conform to the dictate of passive sexuality, and not all men conform to the typical definition of sexual identity, as we'll see in the case of women who go to female strip clubs and rural men who claim a straight identity while having sex with other men. Though sexual scripts lay out for us how we should and shouldn't act, think, and feel sexually, this doesn't mean that everyone follows them. What happens when women and men go off-script?

### Still Straight: Rural Men Having Sex With Men

As we already discussed, sexual behavior is much more complicated than the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* imply. Sexual behavior is more complicated even than what's allowed for in categories like bisexual, demisexual, or pansexual. Take the case of men who identify as straight, even though they regularly have sex with other men, a phenomenon that researchers are finding exists across a wide range of settings, including among white men in rural America (Silva, 2021).

In his study of white, rural MSM (men who have sex with men), Tony Silva highlights the ways in which sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual identity, and sexual cultures are related

but distinct parts of who we are. Sexual attraction involves who we desire, while sexual behavior is what we do sexually. As we'll see with Silva's research, these two don't have to go together—people can have sex without feeling attraction or experience attraction without ever acting on it.

Sexual identity is who we feel we are in regard to our sexuality. In today's Anglo-European society, there are set categories of sexual identity available to us—asexual, pansexual, demisexual, gay, or straight. These identities are often connected to **sexual cultures**, or a particular way of life characterized by a group of people who share a sexual identity. In many places, gay cultures specifically formed in urban neighborhoods that evolved as places of relative safety for LGBTQ+ people. These cultures developed their own norms, values, languages, and symbols.

The 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning* captured many of the specific aspects of one specific sexual culture among queer men of color in New York City, centered around drag balls. Language and norms that were once specific to this culture—phrases like "throwing shade" and "yass!" and dance moves like vogueing—have now become so mainstream that many people no longer know where these phrases came from. As many queer historians and activists note, this is part of how the history of queer people, and specifically poor, queer people of color, gets erased. Many of these aspects of sexual cultures that emerged in urban neighborhoods have become associated more broadly with a gay male or lesbian culture.

We often expect, then, that someone who is a gay man will feel sexual attraction for other men, engage in sexual behavior with other men, identify as a gay man, and participate in some aspects of gay culture. For the men in Silva's study, sexual behavior exists in isolation from most of these other aspects of sexuality. Most of the men had sex with other men while experiencing no attraction to them. How do they make sense of their experiences given the dominant frame in society which connects sexual behavior to sexual attraction, identity, and culture? How do they understand what it means to have sex with other men while staying firmly grounded in a straight identification and a rural version of masculinity?

Some men see the sex they have with other men as satisfying a kink rather than as a result of attraction to other men. These men described themselves as primarily attracted to women but with an occasional "craving" for oral sex with men, for penises, or for anal stimulation. Men like Joe explained that for him, "It's not about the person, I'm only interested in the dick" (Silva p. 39). Another man, Chad, was interested in anal stimulation and turned to sex with men when his girlfriend wasn't interested in pursuing those interests.

These men's explanations raise the question, what is the difference between a kink and sexual identity or orientation? Is a man who enjoys penises by definition gay? In contemporary Anglo-European society, sexual identity is determined mostly by the presumed gender of partners, though this is less the case with identities like pansexual. This is one particular way of thinking about sexual identity but not the only way. As we'll discuss later in the chapter, we could just as easily construct sexual identities on the basis of preferences that are completely unrelated to gender. Even a desire for penises isn't necessarily a desire for men, as not all men have penises (some trans men or intersex men do not have a penis), and not all people who have penises are men (some trans women or intersex women may have a penis).

In an interesting example of intersectionality, some men explain their sexual encounters with other men as a result of the various effects of aging. Chris, a 63-year-old-man, explained

that his wife "has a horrible lack of interest in sex anymore" (Silva, p. 46). Chris and other men like him believe that to have sex with another woman besides their wife would be infidelity, while having sex with another man is not. To "solve" their problem of a less active sex life with their wives, they turn to sex with other men for the first time or increase the frequency with which they have sex with other men.

This option is more attractive for these men because they also believe arranging to have sex with other men is easier and less likely to be burdened by the romantic and emotional expectations they believe women bring to sexual encounters. These beliefs are grounded in the men's convictions about a certain traditional gender ideology—women are more emotional, while men are more sexual. Masculinity and femininity are "opposites," and when you follow this logic to its conclusion, it suggests that men are more sexually compatible with other men than they are with women. For these men, women are preferred as romantic partners, but, for sex, other men make more sense.

A few older men in Silva's study also cited turning to men for sex because of their struggles with erectile dysfunction. As they grew older and encountered more difficulties achieving a full erection, they felt men would be more understanding of their situation than women. Tom, a 59-year-old man, stated he would rather be having sex with "girls," but, "When I couldn't get hard anymore [I] kind of decided to switch teams."

What's interesting about the reasons some of these men give for having sex with other men is that they're firmly grounded in traditional notions of gender. In this worldview, women cannot possibly have casual sex without becoming attached to their male partners. Men, because of their sexual natures, make better sexual partners. At the same time, some of the men suggested that having sex with other men provided them with an escape from some aspects of masculinity. When they had sex with other men, they felt like they didn't have to be in control or demonstrate dominance in the same way they did when they had sex with women. As we discussed earlier in the chapter, the men in Silva's study realized that having sex was also about having a sex, or a way in which to perform gender.

From an intersectional perspective, it matters that many of these men were older and facing the unique challenges that come with sexuality and aging. It also matters that the men are white and rural. When Silva asked the men why they didn't identify as gay or bisexual, he found that it largely wasn't due to overt homophobia. Eighty-one percent of the men in his study were neutral or supportive of gay marriage, and 57% were neutral or supportive of gay people raising children. This isn't to say that some of the men didn't express more subtle forms of homophobia.

However, their own refusal to identify as gay or bisexual was also related to their inability to imagine themselves as part of urban gay culture. Of course, not all gay men live in cities, and there are rural and small-town LGBTQ+ communities. But for these men, to identify as gay would be to give up a version of white masculinity firmly grounded in rural culture, a step they were unwilling to take.

What do the experiences of the men in this study reveal about sexual scripts? As Silva points out, the existence of these men demonstrates the contradictions and flexibility in categories like heterosexual. The men in his study knew that they could have identified as gay or bisexual, but they felt more comfortable remaining firmly grounded in heterosexuality as an

identity and culture rather than as a set of behaviors or attractions. Silva suggests we should think about heterosexuality less as a set of behaviors and orientations and more as an indication of how people live.

## Women at Female Strip Clubs

Women as sexual subjects are seen as less likely to pursue sexual pleasure, but what about women who perform a more active form of sexuality? In their ethnographic study of women as consumers in strip clubs, Kassia R. Wosick-Correa and Lauren J. Joseph (2008) found interesting assumptions that underpin these gendered and sexualized interactions. Wosick-Correa and Joseph studied women customers at four strip clubs in California—two topless and two nude.

They found that women as consumers in these settings were more likely to be passed over by the female strippers than their male counterparts. After performing on the stage, strippers often "circled the floor," asking customers if they'd like a lap dance or joining a table for conversation. In all four settings, the strippers consistently ignored female customers, even when the customers were making eye contact or had tipped the stripper during her stage performance. Two criteria made strippers more likely to approach a female customer—demonstrated enthusiasm and being accompanied by men. Enthusiasm took the form of cheering or demonstrating an almost exaggerated interest in the club's activities. This was more important to the strippers for judging a woman's interest than any cues as to the patron's sexual orientation. Strippers were not more likely to approach women who looked "butch" or lesbian, and enthusiasm was not a criteria for approaching men.

Women customers in strip clubs were also more likely to be approached if they were in the company of men. Strippers explained this strategy as motivated by financial concerns. As one interviewee explained about approaching women customers, "As long as they're with a man who's got money, women are profitable" (Wosick-Correa & Joseph, 2008, p. 207). Not surprisingly, this approach made women as customers in strip clubs largely invisible unless they were accompanied by men.

On the other hand, women customers were often made privy to "behind-the-scenes" areas and interactions that were off-limits to men. Wosick-Correa and Joseph refer to this as sidestaging, drawing on Erving Goffman's conception of front stage and back stage. **Front stage** is understood as not our "true self" but a contrived performance with behaviors and props, while **back stage**, rarely seen by others, is where we can relax and step out of character. Sidestaging, then, is neither front nor back stage, a glimpse into the back stage without it being revealed in its entirety (Wosick-Correa & Joseph, 2008). Sidestaging happens in strip clubs when women customers are allowed access to dressing rooms. In several strip clubs in the study, the dressing rooms were either connected to the women's restrooms or essentially one and the same. Women customers using the women's restroom got to see strippers getting dressed, using the bathroom, and making costume adjustments, activities concealed from men.

Strippers also engaged in sidestaging when they involved women customers in conversations while on the floor. Strippers sometimes complained about male customers to women customers.

They were also more likely to reveal their real names to women customers. In the following interaction, a stripper called Princess commiserates with the researcher about her bra:

> We were sitting at the main stage watching the third dancer perform. . . . When she first came up to us, she looked at me as she adjusted the underwire of her bra, saying, "Ugh . . . my bra!" in a way that suggested I would know how uncomfortable and/or annoying bras are because I am a woman and have breasts myself. (Wosick-Correa & Joseph, 2008, p. 210)

Wosick-Correa and Joseph argue that sidestaging makes it effectively impossible for women customers in strip clubs to view the strippers as commodities in the same way men customers do. A commodity is by definition imbued with magical qualities, and viewing strippers in sidestage areas and interactions precludes women customers from participation in the fetishizing process.

Though women customers are rendered invisible on the floor and prevented from commodifying strippers, they may also benefit from the ways in which strippers tailor their behavior to them. Strippers described the ways in which they tailored lap dances to their women customers and saw these interactions as more comfortable, playful, and sensual than lap dances with men customers. Tailoring in lap dances included placing their heads between customers' legs rather than on top for simulation of oral sex, hip grinding between the legs rather than on the lap or none at all, and use of hands to touch breasts and nipples (Wosick-Correa & Joseph, 2008). In addition, strippers explained a different dynamic involved in giving women customers a lap dance. As one stripper elaborated, "It's fun giving girls a lap dance, because the guys take it so seriously. With a girl, it's more playful. . . . You can have fun with it more" (Wosick-Correa & Joseph, 2008, p. 212).

The experience of women in female strip clubs reinforces the prevalence of sexual scripts about sexuality and gender. Men don't have to demonstrate enthusiasm to be approached by strippers on the floor because our norms about masculine sexuality assume enthusiasm for a man in that setting. With women customers, strippers felt they had to differentiate between the women who were there unwillingly to make their boyfriend or husband happy or to monitor their boyfriend's or husband's behavior and the women who were genuinely interested in same-sex eroticism. The strippers felt no need to make such distinctions for male customers. As consumers of erotic experiences, women customers in strip clubs had to work harder to gain the attention of strippers. This is one potentially negative consequence of violating sexual scripts. But because strippers approached lap dances with women differently, they seemed able to "drop the act" that remained in place with men customers.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 5.2

### THE BISEXUAL BOOM AND BISEXUAL ERASURE

Bisexual people are both one of the least visible sexual identities and the fastest-growing category under the LGBTQ umbrella. Increases in those identifying as bisexual account for most of the growth in the LGBTQ community from 2008 to 2018, report Tristan Bridges and Mignon R. Moore (2018). In that 10-year period, the percentage of people in the United States

identifying as lesbian or gay increased by 1.7%, while the percentage of people identifying as bisexual increased by 3.3% (Compton & Bridges, 2019). In fact, over those 10 years, the number of people identifying as lesbian or gay has remained fairly stable, while the ranks of those labeling themselves as bisexual has shot up. Currently, bisexual people make up 52% of the LGBTQ community, while lesbians are 17% and gay men 31% (GLAAD, 2016). The growth in bisexual identification is mainly among women, for whom identifying as bisexual is more popular than identifying as lesbian. The opposite is true for men, where more men identify as gay than as bisexual. Young people (ages 18–34) are also more likely to identify as bisexual. Black bisexuals account for a large percentage of this shift, making up 7% of all Black respondents in the 2018 General Social Survey. These increasing numbers should mean that we see bisexual people everywhere, but that's not the case. Bisexual erasure or invisibility is the pervasive problem by which the existence or legitimacy of bisexuality is questioned or outright denied. Bisexual people are erased when they are paired with either same-gender or different-gender partners. That is, a bisexual woman in a relationship with another woman is assumed to be a lesbian, while a bisexual woman in a relationship with a man is assumed to be straight. When bisexual people lay claim to their identity while in a relationship, especially when in a relationship with someone of a different gender, their identification may be ignored or dismissed. "She's not really bisexual if she's married to a man," people might say. Bisexual people are often sometimes described as "allies" to the LGBTQ community, which negates their place as part of that community. Even bisexual celebrities like Lady Gaga and Alan Cumming must assert that their identities are bisexual rather than gay or lesbian. Why do you think the number of people who identify as bisexual is increasing? What steps need to be taken to make bisexual more visible as an identity?

## Bisexuality and the Bisexual Umbrella

When we move outside the sphere of heteronormativity, how do sexual scripts change? Although *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* as terms date back to the late 19th century, bisexuality is an even more recent concept in social life. In one of its early uses by an American doctor, *heterosexual* was used to describe someone with "inclinations to both sexes," which is how we currently understand what it means to be bisexual and demonstrates how initially the meanings of terms like *heterosexual* and *homosexual* were unclear (Katz, 2009).

In contemporary Anglo-European society, bisexuality is recognized as a category of sexual identity alongside heterosexuality and homosexuality. Bisexuality does not come without its own continuing stigmas, though. Bisexuals can receive negative reactions from both homosexuals and heterosexuals. In her study of the way in which lesbian feminists conceive of bisexual women, Amber Ault (1996) identified four techniques of neutralization through which some lesbian feminists express their hostility toward bisexual women. Through suppression, lesbians insist that there is no such thing as bisexuality. Bisexuals are either confused lesbians or heterosexuals who are experimenting. This is connected to the second technique: incorporation. Bisexual women are lesbians who are not yet aware of their lesbian identity or are "on a bi now gay later plan" (Ault, 1996, p. 314). Marginalization acknowledges that bisexual women exist, but it considers them to be unimportant to lesbian politics and lesbian communities; bisexuals are on the fence and

therefore not to be counted. Delegitimation, the final technique of neutralization, casts aspersions on the character of bisexual women as promiscuous, disloyal bed-hoppers. The animosity felt by some lesbian women toward bisexuals leads them to describe bi women as "sexually promiscuous, personally deceived, immature, in denial, perverted and unable to form stable familial bonds" (Ault, 1996, p. 314). These descriptions are all labels that heterosexual culture also directs at lesbians, and Ault points to the ways in which bisexuals are stigmatized by a group (lesbians) that are themselves already stigmatized.

The bisexual women in Ault's (1996) study point out that on the other hand, they are often subject to the exact same discrimination and hostility as their lesbian counterparts from the straight world. A bisexual woman walking down the street with her female lover is harassed as a lesbian, and her harassers are unlikely to stop and ask her whether she's bisexual before they do so. Courts and legal institutions also often lump bisexuals together with gays and lesbians. Colorado's Amendment 2 prohibited any laws in the state that would have given protection to homosexuals, lesbians, or those with bisexual orientations. In other words, this law ensured that these groups would not be protected from discrimination based on sexual orientation as individuals are ensured protection based on their gender, race, nationality, and religion. In the eyes of these lawmakers, bisexuals are not considered distinct from gays and lesbians. Like homosexuality, bisexuality is placed clearly outside the boundaries of what makes "normal" sexuality and treated by our heteronormative culture as similar to homosexuality.

In Ault's (1996) study, some bisexual women referred to straights as well as gays and lesbians as monosexuals. More recently, some have argued that bisexuality is an umbrella identity, meaning that it's a larger term for many types of nonmonosexual identities, behaviors, and attractions. Included under the bisexual umbrella would be identities like pansexual or omnisexual, queer, and fluid. Pansexual or omnisexual refers to those whose sexual, romantic, or emotional attraction to other people ignores gender identity. Pansexual people may also call themselves gender-blind, meaning that sex category and gender are not determining factors in who they find attractive. Queer here refers to those who fall somewhere in the middle of the sexual orientation spectrum. To claim fluid as a sexual identity generally means a person's sexual identity is open and changing, as well as being nonbinary based. All three of these identities have in common a rejection of limiting attraction to just one gender. The advantage of grouping these different ways of being together is that it emphasizes similarities and has the potential to help form community. But tensions can emerge in that emphasis of sameness that can cover over important differences (Flanders, 2017).

## Asexuality

Asexuality is another category of sexual identity that questions the notion that sexual attraction is a universal experience. **Asexuality** is defined by the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) as a person who does not experience sexual attraction (Cerankowski & Milks, 2015). AVEN is an online community where members from around the world gather to discuss asexuality and to organize for increased visibility around this identity. As asexuality

gains attention within academia and the outside world, questions arise about what exactly it means to be asexual and how gender fits within these conceptions.

Those who claim an asexual identity stress that not experiencing sexual attraction is not a disorder. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*), a comprehensive list of recognized psychological disorders, includes two entries that relate to asexuality—sexual aversion disorder and hyposexual desire disorder (Scherrer, 2008). People who identify as asexual distinguish their experience from these disorders by emphasizing that they are not distressed by their lack of sexual attraction. They also challenge the psychological and biological notions that experiencing sexual attraction is an essential part of what it means to be human. Asexual individuals assert that there is nothing wrong with their lack of sexual attraction. In fact, in interviews with people who self-identify as asexual, Scherrer (2008) found that many saw asexuality as a biological phenomenon. Similar to some within the gay and lesbian community, asexual individuals say that they've always been asexual, even before they had a label available to describe their identity.

Though asexuality as a sexual identity could appear to be a way of organizing sexuality outside any gender context, Scherrer didn't find this to necessarily be the case. Asexual respondents identified themselves not just in relation to their sexuality but also in reference to their romantic preferences. So in addition to labeling themselves asexual, they might also include romantic or aromantic as categories. To be **aromantic** means having no romantic drive or no desire to find a romantic partner (Scherrer, 2008). Some asexual individuals expressed a desire for a romantic relationship even if they were not sexually attracted to their partner. This way of thinking about identity reflects a growing acknowledgment of the complexity of sexual desire. Asexual individuals recognize that a lack of sexual attraction may be completely unrelated to the desire for someone to share one's life with romantically.

Respondents in Scherrer's (2008) study did not completely abandon the role of gender in the ways in which they made sense of their sexual and romantic lives. Being asexual, for some respondents, did not mean they no longer fitted themselves into existing categories of sexual orientation based on gender, such as homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual. One respondent explained:

> I am asexual and I am not attracted to either males or females. Also, I've always identified myself as straight, but considering I do not really have any desire to enter a sexual or a touchy/feely relationship it is a bit of a moot point in my opinion. (p. 11)

For respondents like this, describing their sexual identity using gender (as straight) did not conflict with their asexuality. Among the people Scherrer studied, 23 participants identified as queer, while 28 indicated a heterosexual or straight gender identity. Asexual respondents also identified as bisexual or biromantic, but as Scherrer points out, a bi orientation still prioritizes gender as central to sexual identity. Though asexuality potentially moves the axis of sexual identity away from gender, many respondents still orient themselves around gender object choice. This suggests the continuing pull of gender's influence on how we think about and conceive of our sexuality.

Asexuality, along with other sexual identities, is described in Table 5.2.

| TABLE 5.2 ■ Types of Sexual Identity | |
|---|---|
| Homosexual, gay or lesbian | Those who experience emotional, sexual, and/or romantic attraction to people of the same sex, gender, or gender identity |
| Bisexual | Those who are emotionally, romantically, and/or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree |
| Asexual | Those who experience no sexual attraction or desire for other people |
| Pansexual | Those who have the potential for emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of any gender, though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way, or to the same degree |
| Questioning | Those who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity |
| Queer | A term often used to express fluid identities and orientations; often used interchangeably with *LGBTQ+* |
| Omnisexual | Those attracted to people from across the gender spectrum; similar to *pansexual*. Omnisexual people recognize potential partners' genders, are attracted to all genders, and make decisions about partners based on their gender. |
| Heterosexual or straight | Those who are emotionally, sexually, and/or romantically attracted to people of the "opposite" sex, gender, or gender identity |

*Sources:* Adapted from: Gendering and sexuality basics. TeenHealthSource. http://teenhealthsource.com/giso/gender-sexuality-abcs/ (accessed October 29, 2019); Glossary of terms. Human Rights Campaign. https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms (accessed October 29, 2019).

## SEXUALITY AND POWER: HETERO-PRIVILEGE IN SCHOOLS

Sexuality intersects with gender through the sexual scripts it provides as well as the influence of gender on categories of sexual identity. It shouldn't be surprising to discover that, like gender as a social category, sexuality is a tool used to distribute power in our social lives. The Heterosexual Questionnaire we discussed earlier begins to reveal some of the privileges associated with sexual identity. If you're like many of the straight students in my classes, you've never had to explain to anyone why you're straight. The privilege of not being called on to explain your sexual desires and behavior is a part of heteronormativity, as we discussed earlier. A privilege is an (not necessarily) earned right attached to a social status. You can think of it as the goodies or bonus that comes with occupying a certain kind of status in society. As a professor, you get to tell your students what to do, and that's a privilege. Privileges are also attached to statuses like race, social class, gender, and sexual identity.

**Hetero-privilege** is the set of unearned rights given to heterosexuals in many societies. One privilege received by heterosexuals in Anglo-European society is to never (or rarely) have to explain their sexuality to other people; it's a privilege not to have to explain to someone why you have sexual desire for someone of the opposite sex. Institutions, norms, and values

in heteronormative societies reinforce the perceived normality of heterosexuality. Prior to the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court ruling in 2015, which legalized gay and lesbian marriage in all states, the institution of marriage was deeply heteronormative. The reaction in states such as Kentucky, where government officials refused to issue marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples, demonstrates the continuing power of heteronormativity.

In a heteronormative society, all institutions privilege heterosexuals and assume heterosexuality as the norm. Take a minute to think about some of the ways in which heterosexuality may be built into the structure of your particular college or university. Are men and women allowed to live together in the same dorm room? At a few colleges and universities, the answer may be yes, but generally, even in coed (mixed-sex) dorms, women live with women in individual dorm rooms. Why do many colleges and universities prevent men and women from living together in the same dorm room, and what assumptions are they making about the sexuality of their students? This practice is heteronormative in that it assumes that to prevent romantic or sexually involved couples from living together on college campuses, women and men must be prevented from living in the same room but *not* men with men or women with women.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of other examples of heteronormativity on your college or university campus or other ways in which practices and values reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is normal and right?*

Other researchers have documented the ways in which middle schools and high schools, as educational institutions, control sexuality and enforce heterosexuality on their students (Eder et al., 1995; Miceli, 2009; Pascoe, 2007). Heterosexuality is part of the **hegemonic curriculum** in these schools, in that the practices in these institutions both legitimize the dominant culture and marginalize or reject other cultures and forms of knowledge (Miceli, 2009). This is to say that schools teach the centrality of heterosexuality, not just or primarily through the formal curriculum (e.g., textbooks, exams, lectures, assignments) but through the informal practices of the institutions. Perhaps the simplest example of this heteronormativity is the institution of prom. Melinda S. Miceli (2009) argued that prom represents the culmination of the *hetero-romantic* norm that dominates high schools and middle schools. **Hetero-romantic norms** prescribe specific behavioral norms for men and women that are important to proving their masculinity or femininity as well as gaining acceptance in the peer culture of high school. Prom, exemplifying the complex relationship between gender and sexuality, reinforces heterosexuality and prevailing gender norms in one neat little package. Prom is heteronormative most obviously in that, until recently, and still for many high schools, a prom date consists of a young man and a young woman; although the two most popular individuals in any given high school may be two young men or two young women, the prom court always consists of a king and a queen rather than of

a queen and a queen. Prom is an opportunity for high school women and men to demonstrate fully their gender identities, as young women focus on their appearance, their dress, and a date who will treat them well. For young men, prom is about securing an attractive date and, often, ending the evening with sex. A whole genre of popular films is dedicated to enshrining these norms surrounding prom as the culminating event in a young person's life up to that point. These are all good examples of the ways in which our schools are gendered organizations.

Prom is just one small example of the hegemonic curriculum in schools enforcing heterosexuality. Beginning in elementary school and continuing through high school, students are constantly divided into groups of boys and girls for various activities. Academic awards are often distributed to one young man and one young woman. Heterosexual expressions of public affection are often tolerated by fellow students and school officials in ways that homosexual expressions of affection are not. Sex education in schools generally assumes heterosexuality as the norm and does not explore the possibility of other sexual ways of being, let alone address the many issues gay and lesbian teenagers may face. Any attempts to include models of sexuality that differ from the heterosexual norm in sex education are generally met with fierce resistance by parents and other community members. On top of all of these institutional practices, heterosexuality is enforced in schools by ongoing harassment of gay and lesbian students. In one survey, 84% of LGBTQ students reported that they had been verbally harassed, while 82.9% added that teachers and administrators rarely, if ever, intervened when they heard homophobic comments (Miceli, 2009). Sixty-four percent of LGBTQ students reported that they felt unsafe at their school because of their sexual orientation.

This hegemonic curriculum emphasizing heteronormativity has more recently been taken one step further in places like Florida in the United States. In fact, laws like the "Don't Say Gay" bill enforce more than heteronormativity, stepping into outright homophobia. This law, signed by conservative, Republican governor Ron DeSantis, bans public school teachers in Florida from holding classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity (Diaz, 2022). In addition, the law includes a parental notification policy, which requires teachers and other officials to inform parents of any health or support services offered to their children in school, as well as giving them the right to deny those services on behalf of their children. Organizations like The Trevor Project have pointed out that this encourages school officials to out LGBTQ+ children to their parents, an especially dangerous situation for children whose parents are not supportive of their queer identity. Though corporations like Walt Disney in Florida have expressed their opposition to the "Don't Say Gay Bill," the law took effect on July 1, 2022.

## Nationalism and Heteronormativity

Negotiating what it means to live outside the established norms of a heteronormative society becomes even more complicated when issues of race, ethnicity, and nationalism enter the picture. In our globalized world, the Anglo-European categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality are increasingly becoming the dominant way of thinking about sexuality. It's no surprise, then, that many people in the global South associate homosexual behavior and homosexuality with the West and often with Western imperialism. Although same-sex sexual behavior may

have existed in these societies, the particular formulation of homosexuality and heterosexuality *is* a new concept to many cultures. In areas of the world where nationalism is strong, homosexuality poses a particular problem to the project of nation building.

**Nationalism** is "a genre of claims, understandings, and grounds for recognizing, promoting, and legitimizing peoplehood, identity, and sovereignty" (LiPuma, 1997, p. 36). Nationalism is similar to ethnicity in that it involves a group of people who make a claim to some common sense of peoplehood, but unlike ethnicity, nationalism includes a political claim—to land or sovereignty. Nationalism in most of its manifestations is both gendered and sexualized. Nationalism is inherently masculine, as nationalist scripts are generally written primarily for men, about men, and by men. The nation-state is a masculine institution, with its strictly hierarchical structure and male dominance of decision-making positions. In addition, the culture of nationalism emphasizes and resonates with masculine themes such as honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery, and duty (Nagel, 2003). It is men's job to form, define, and defend the nation, and because of this masculine formulation, both feminists and homosexuals constitute a threat to the cause of nationalism.

Women's role in nationalism is largely reproductive and symbolic. Women's bodies can come to represent symbolically a nation, and therefore, the sexual purity of women becomes important to nationalist causes. A woman who has sex with someone outside the national group is considered a traitor, defiling the honor of the nation as a whole in a way that a man violating those boundaries is not. This partly explains the use of rape as a weapon of war and ethnic/national conflict; women's bodies become symbolic of the actual territory of the nation, and so to violate (through rape) a woman's body is to gain a kind of military victory.

Women's reproductive role is to increase the population of the nation itself. In nationalist settings like Fascist Italy and the ethnic dictatorship of the former Yugoslavia, governments curtailed women's control of their reproduction in hopes of increasing their national population. Feminist claims for the interests of women are perceived as competing with the agenda of the nation as a whole, and such women face challenges to their loyalty to the nationalist cause and their sexuality; they may be labeled as lesbians or as in league with colonialist oppressors and acting under the influence of Western feminism (Nagel, 2003). Obviously, to the extent that feminists also argue for women's control of their own reproduction, they also come into conflict with the nationalist agenda.

Homosexuality is considered problematic to nationalist goals for a variety of reasons. First, nationalism is an inherently backward-looking vision of the world, often advocating a return to some real or imagined precolonial past, before outside oppressors polluted the "true" culture of the people. This backward-looking orientation is at odds with the generally forward-looking orientation of both feminism and gay and lesbian rights movements, for whom this idealized past is probably not so ideal (Nagel, 2003).

Homosexuality among men also threatens the masculinity of nationalist movements, sometimes leading to "homosexual panics," as exemplified in the Nazi persecution of homosexuals during World War II (when they were branded with a pink triangle much like the gold star for Jews in Germany) and the Cold War practice of expunging supposed homosexuals from the U.S. and British government. Senator Joseph McCarthy of the United States is famous for his relentless search for Communists during the 1950s, but McCarthy was also interested in

homosexuals in the government, presumably because these individuals posed a blackmail threat (Nagel, 2003). Homosexuality is also a threat to nationalism because, like feminism, it is often considered to be a product of the West and colonialism and, therefore, incompatible with the return to a precolonial utopia.

All these complex interconnections among nationalism, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are lived out in the experiences of many gays and lesbians living in or emigrating from parts of the global South. In her study of Arab American femininities, Nadine Naher (2009) used oral histories of Arab American women living in the United States to examine these intersections of nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexuality.

In the oral history of Lulu, a Syrian American Muslim woman living in San Francisco, she described how, among Muslims in her parents' native Syria, cultural beliefs dictated that women should be virgins when they marry, and although Arab men may have sex before they marry, they don't have sex with good Muslim women. Lulu identified that in her family narrative, "whores" are either Christian women or American women. When Lulu came out as a lesbian to her Syrian family, her sexuality was framed within a perspective that views homosexuality as American. Lulu's uncles told her, "This (lesbianism) doesn't happen in our culture. You've been brainwashed by Americans. You've taken too many feminist classes, you joined NOW (National Organization for Women), you hate men, you have a backlash against men." Lulu said, "It was like . . . 'This is what American society has done to our daughter'" (Naher, 2009, p. 189). In this particular blending of nationalism, gender, and sexuality, lesbianism is perceived as nonexistent in Arab cultures, and Lulu's new identity must therefore be a product of her enculturation into American society and her exposure to feminism.

In these types of encounters, gay men and lesbians receive messages that they cannot be both Arab and homosexual, which is a good example of how gender overlaps with categories like ethnicity and nationality. Lulu's family told her that lesbianism is something that doesn't exist in Arab culture, and it's not surprising that Lulu herself felt that she could not be both Arab and gay. As she explained in her oral history, "When that was the reaction, I totally disassociated myself from Arabs. I felt I couldn't be gay and Arab. I felt that either I have to go home and be straight or totally out and pass as white" (Naher, 2009, p. 189). Lulu eventually found a network of other Arab lesbians and came to realize that she did not have to give up either part of her identity, being lesbian or being Arab. But her family, who had once told Lulu she was "the only gay Arab in the world," explained the existence of other lesbian Arab women by saying that these other women must be American or Christian (Naher, 2009, pp. 189–190). In this nationalist perspective, both lesbianism and feminism are associated with American nationality rather than Syrian or Arab nationality, as well as with Christianity rather than with Islamic faith.

Lulu's story and the stories of other people who face a complex constellation of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexuality demonstrate the ways in which sexuality itself can be used to reinforce and draw other boundaries. Americans as a nation are different from Syrians and Arabs in part because of their sexual practices. In Naher's (2009) larger study, she revealed a dichotomy used by Arab families to police their daughters' behavior in which "good Arab girls" were opposed to "bad American(ized) girls" and "Arab virgin[s]" were opposed to "American(ized) whore[s]" (Naher, 2009, p. 187). In addition,

homosexuality was seen as American or Christian and, therefore, not part of authentic Arab culture or true Islamic tradition.

Using sexuality to draw these kinds of boundaries is hardly unique to Arab cultures, and it is a central but largely unexamined facet of American history. Early explorers and settlers used sexuality to draw boundaries between themselves and other groups like Native Americans and Africans. Native American women were described as beastlike and eager to copulate, defile, and prostitute themselves with early explorers. African women were similarly described as lecherous and beastly, while some peoples were described as having men among them who lived as women and married men (Nagel, 2003). Some accounts by male European explorers focused on the unusually large size of African men's genitalia and, not surprisingly, concluded that this was yet another indication of their bestiality and moral inferiority. The supposedly more primitive sexual practices and lax morality of Native Americans and Africans became part of the ideology that justified their virtual destruction as a people and enslavement. During the period of American enslavement of African Americans, beliefs about the sexuality of slaves helped to justify the systematic rape of Black women by their white male owners.

These examples point to the ways in which sexuality, like gender, can be an important tool of power. With hindsight, we know that many of the differences "observed" by European explorers and settlers were differences they imposed because of their own particular viewpoint. Explorers and settlers wanted, to some extent, to believe that these groups were different from and inferior to them, and it's therefore no surprise that this is what they found. Their beliefs about the sexuality of Africans and Native Americans were socially constructed, but those social constructions had devastating effects. Under the system of slavery, a Black woman could not legally be raped by anyone, her master or another slave; as legal property, she had no right to dictate whom she did and did not have sex with, and historical court records as well as slave narratives demonstrate that under today's definitions, the rape of female slaves was a common practice.

## Red = Top; Black = Bottom

We began this chapter with one vision of what sexuality might look like in a world without gender. John Stoltenberg's (2006) vision of having sex without having *a* sex is also a world in which the solidity of the links between sexuality and gender becomes a little more fluid. A queer theory approach gives us another vision of what a sexuality unhooked from sex category and gender might look like. Kate Bornstein (1994) is a trans woman, and in her book *Gender Outlaw*, she suggested what desire might look like uncoupled from these other categories. Instead of basing our sexual choices on the particular genitalia someone does or does not possess, which is assumed under the categories of homosexual and heterosexual, what if we chose based on the particular type of sexual activity we prefer?

Bornstein proposed a set of colored bracelets that could be worn to indicate the type of sexual activity preferred by individuals as well as their preferred position of dominance or passivity. An orange bracelet would indicate "anything goes," while a light-blue bracelet would indicate a preference for oral sex. Red would signify you prefer to be a "top," while black would be code

for those who like to be a "bottom." Surely, the kinds of things one likes to do sexually are an important component of sexual compatibility, perhaps as important as if not more important than someone's sex category or gender. Someone's sex category or gender doesn't necessarily tell us anything about what they do or don't like to do sexually.

Bornstein's (1994) proposed system is consistent with queer theory in its attempt to expose the problems with many of our existing categories. Knowing that someone is genitally female or a woman does not tell you what particular kind of sexual act she might like to engage in or whether she likes to engage in sexual acts at all. We use sex category and gender to organize our sexual desire and attraction because we believe these categories do tell us something true and important about another person that will make them compatible with us in some way. This is placing a great deal of faith in these categories, as well as assuming there is something consistently true enough about the people we call men or women that makes them all potential romantic or sexual partners.

Queer theory reminds us to question whether this is true. Is there anything consistently true about all the people in the world labeled men? This is queer theory questioning gender categories. Queer theory also proposes treating categories as open and fluid, and Bornstein's bracelet system is a good example of this. Bracelets can easily be put on and taken off, depending on the mood you're in. This means that power in sexuality does not necessarily disappear. If you wear a bracelet that indicates you like to dominate in sexual activities, you're likely to have the power in that encounter. But it would mean that individuals could choose whether they wanted to be the one with or without the power in any given situation rather than being assumed to be passive or submissive based on something that's largely out of their control (their sex category or gender).

Under this system, power doesn't disappear altogether, but it becomes more free-floating, a matter of individual choice rather than institutional prerogative. Unlike gender or sex category, which we're generally stuck with and about which we have little choice, in Bornstein's system, your particular position of power in sexual encounters could change from day to day. And power (who's submissive and who's passive) would be just one small way of describing the full complexity of our sexual desires. Sexuality would be about acts (what you like to do) rather than types of people (e.g., males/females, men/women, heterosexuals/homosexuals). What effects would such a way of thinking about sexuality have on our conceptions of gender?

## BIG QUESTIONS

- In this chapter, we explored what it means to say that sexuality is socially constructed, even though social scientists have only recently begun to explore this idea. Why do you think the social construction of sexuality is something that has just recently begun to be explored? Why might it be more difficult to think of sexuality as socially constructed?
- How is the construction of feminine sexuality as passive and masculine sexuality as active important to larger issues of gender inequality? Some gender scholars argue that sexuality is *the* key to understanding gender inequality. How might you make the argument that the ability to control someone's sexuality is an important aspect of power? How does this connect to current debates about women's reproductive rights?

- How are both women and men harmed by gendered beliefs about sexuality? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being perceived as a sexual object or as a sexual subject?
- In this chapter, we discussed contradictory ideologies about women's sexuality. Although women are often perceived as sexually passive, other traditions suggest that women have more sexual desire than men. How might you explain these contradictions? What are the gendered implications of these two perspectives on feminine sexuality?
- We suggested in this chapter that homosexuality is not at all the same as same-sex sexual behavior and that the names we use to identify social behaviors and values matter. Do you agree that terms like *homosexuality* and *heterosexuality* should apply only to certain cultural contexts and that to attempt to describe behaviors outside that context using these terms confuses the different meanings of these behaviors in different cultural contexts?
- Given what you now know about the social construction of sexuality, what might be problems with research that attempts to explain why some people are homosexual and some people are heterosexual from a biosocial perspective? For example, if you were doing such a study, how would you define the criteria for what makes someone heterosexual and what makes someone homosexual?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. In this chapter, we discussed the double standard regarding masculine and feminine sexuality. The double standard has a linguistic component in the form of language asymmetry. Test this out by generating a list for yourself of all the terms (slang and otherwise) used to describe promiscuity or immoral sexual behavior for women, and then make a similar list for men. Ask other people to generate similar lists, and then compare. Is there an asymmetry in the number of words available to describe promiscuous or immoral sexual behavior in women as compared with men? How does this relate to the double standard?
2. How are our ideas about appropriate sexual behavior for women and appropriate sexual behavior for men different? Conduct your own informal surveys or interviews on this topic by devising a list of questions on how people would view certain behaviors in women and men. For example, you might ask people what an acceptable number of sexual partners is for women as compared with men—or how they would view a man cheating on his partner as compared with a woman. Interview or survey people from different backgrounds to compare how they think about these issues.
3. In this chapter, we attempted to describe a homosexual role, or the basic expectations that go along with being homosexual in current Anglo-European society, as well as the difficulty in establishing what it means to be homosexual or heterosexual. Ask a group of people what they believe makes someone heterosexual or homosexual. Is it sexual behavior, sexual desire, or sexual identity? Be specific. Is someone who has had one opposite-sex sexual experience automatically heterosexual? How many opposite-sex sexual experiences are required to make someone "officially" heterosexual?

4. Pick an institution or group to which you belong. This could be a formal group, like a club, or an informal group, like your friends or family. Write an essay reflecting on ways in which this group or institution is heteronormative. You might think about how someone who is not heterosexual would experience belonging to this group or institution. Try to uncover the taken-for-granted ways in which this institution or group assumes that its members are heterosexual or that heterosexuality is the norm (this exercise will probably be easier if you are not heterosexual and have had these experiences yourself). How could this group or institution change in ways that make it no longer heteronormative?

5. Gender and sexuality are connected in that many gay and lesbian people are assumed to have a different gender identity than straight people. Gay men are assumed to be less masculine and lesbian women less feminine. Pick some films, television shows, magazines, or books that depict gay and lesbian people. Conduct a content analysis of these cultural artifacts, identifying how often gay and lesbian characters are depicted as acting in ways that are gender consistent as opposed to gender inconsistent. What does this content analysis tell you about our views on gender and sexuality?

6. Increasing numbers of media outlets cater specifically to gay and lesbian communities. Magazines include *The Advocate, Out, Curve*, and *Gay Life*. Conduct a content analysis of some of these cultural artifacts, examining the ways in which gender is depicted in these magazines. For example, you might compare the articles about women and men in *The Advocate* with articles in "straight" men's and women's magazines such as *GQ* and *Cosmo*. Are there differences in gender depictions in these gay and straight media outlets?

7. Interview someone from a cultural background different from your own about his or her culture's perspectives on sexuality as well as his or her own views. You might ask questions about the person's views on the differences between men and women's sexuality, how he or she thinks about what is appropriate and inappropriate sexually, and how he or she thinks about homosexuality and heterosexuality.

8. Sexual identities like bisexual, pansexual, fluid, and queer are gaining increasing attention in the media. Conduct a content analysis of articles covering the sexual identity of celebrities. What assumptions are evident in how they talk about what it means to be pansexual or fluid? Do the articles suggest a greater acceptance of sexual identities beyond gay and lesbian?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**The Asexual Visibility & Education Network**

Online community for asexual individuals as well as a large archive of resources on asexuality.

www.asexuality.org

**PFLAG**

Parents, families, friends, and allies united with LGBTQ people to move equality forward.

www.pflag.org

**Human Rights Campaign**

Largest LGBTQ civil rights advocacy group in the United States.

www.hrc.org

**OutRight Action International**

Global advocacy group focusing on LGBTQ rights worldwide.

www.outrightinternational.org

## KEY TERMS

Aromantic
Asexuality
Back stage
Cisheteropatriarchy
Compulsive heterosexuality
Double standard
Emotional intimacy
Ethnocentrism
Front stage
Hegemonic curriculum
Heteronormativity
Hetero-privilege
Hetero-romantic norms
Homosexual identity
Ideal love
Nationalism
Romantic love
Sex
Sexology
Sexual attraction
Sexual cultures
Sexual desire
Sexual identity
Sexual object
Sexual scripts
Sexual subjects
Two-gender model
Two-sex model
Two-spirit

## SUGGESTED READINGS

### ON SEXUALITY IN GENERAL

Ferber, A. L., Holcomb, K., & Wentling, T. (2008). *Sex, gender, and sexuality*. Oxford University Press.

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# 6 HOW DOES GENDER IMPACT THE PEOPLE YOU SPEND YOUR TIME WITH?

## The Gender of Friendship and Dating

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **6.1** Describe the social importance of love in the context of friendship.
- **6.2** Compare and contrast ideas about male and female approaches to friendship.
- **6.3** Identify some ways friendship looks different in cultures and communities outside the U.S.
- **6.4** Summarize some examples of how views of dating and romantic attraction have changed since the 19th century.
- **6.5** Explain some challenges individuals who do not conform to a traditional understanding of gender can face in romantic and sexual relationships.

Who was the first friend you ever had? How did you know they were your friend? Was your first friend of the same gender or of a different gender? Did that matter to the friendship?

What about your friends now? Are they mostly of the same gender, a different gender, or some mixture of both? In your experience, does one gender or another make better friends? How do you know the difference between being what we call "just friends" with someone and being "more than friends"? What's the difference between dating someone and being friends with them? How do you even know what a date is for sure, and what's the point of dating?

Does dating have to lead to marriage, and do you have to date before you get married? What does dating look like if you're not particularly interested in marriage? Where did this whole idea of dating come from in the first place? What happens in places where people date, and how does that affect the way people interact with each other? And one last whopper of a question: How does love fit into this whole picture?

### LOVE, INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE FAMILY

The preceding questions introduce some of the topics we explore in this chapter on friendship and romantic love. You could say that this chapter is about all the kinds of love that exist between human beings that are mainly outside the context of family. In this chapter, we make

a separation between what we might call familial and nonfamilial relationships, although as you'll see throughout this chapter, that division is not exactly cut and dried. In some places, especially close friends become twins—demonstrating the closeness and importance of this bond. This makes sense historically in some Anglo-European traditions as well, such as when St. Augustine called his friend "thou half of my soul" (Brain, 1976).

Do friends who are so close that they're "like brothers" or literally twins fit in the chapter on friendship or the chapter on family? What about many societies, including our own, where networks of friendship and kin often overlap (although perhaps less than in the past or in other cultures)? **Kin** refers to the people with whom you're related, either by actual blood (e.g., your biological mother or biological sister) or through symbolic ties (e.g., an adoptive mother or father, stepmothers, stepfathers, stepsiblings). In New Guinea, men are said to marry their wives not for any love or special attraction to them but to have their wives' brothers as best friends—thus demonstrating the interconnections between kin and friends (Brain, 1976). As is true throughout our exploration of gender, the line in the sand between love inside the family and love outside its bounds is not so easy to draw. This chapter leans in the direction of relationships that exist outside the family.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Is there any intersection between the people who qualify as your kin and the people you call friends? Would you consider brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, or uncles friends? What makes someone not just kin but also a friend?*

Does it make sense to begin a discussion of friendship with a discussion of love? Or should that be reserved for the chapter on family? What is the difference between the love you feel for a friend and the love you feel for a member of your family? Is one more important than the other? These questions are related to a particular problem sociologists and other researchers encounter in the study and examination of friendship—what exactly is it?

Many of us think of love as an emotion largely reserved for romantic relationships and the intimate bonds of family. But other societies and cultures have held up love for friends as the highest form of love there is, a love superior for being more altruistic and voluntary than other types of love (Allan, 1990). C. S. Lewis called it one of the four primary types of love, and many Anglo-European traditions celebrate great friends such as Achilles and Patroclus in Greek myth, Jonathan and David in the Bible, or any of the pairs in countless buddy movies, from Paul Newman and Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* to Kristin Wiig and Maya Rudolph in *Bridesmaids*.

Although this may be changing in many modern societies, by and large, we don't get to choose our families, and they often expect a lot from us; philosophers like Lewis have argued that these two criteria (choice and obligation) are part of what makes friendship unique and perhaps better than other types of relationships. In places like the United States, we pretty much *do*

get to choose our romantic partners, but entering a relationship such as marriage is something more or less voluntary depending on who you are and where you live. There are also a great many expectations within romantic relationships that may not be true of friendship.

But the idea behind sentiments such as those of C. S. Lewis and St. Augustine is that we choose our friends with a freedom that doesn't exist in other relationships. Once those choices are made, friendship, so the argument goes, is mostly about the simple enjoyment of another person's company, no strings attached. In contemporary Anglo-European society, friendship might not be held up as the highest form of love as it was in the past, but we can probably agree in principle that friendship is both voluntary and largely altruistic. In this way of thinking, if you're friends with someone primarily because of what you can get out of the relationship, then that relationship really ceases to be appropriately labeled a friendship (Allan, 1990).

So we can agree that friendship is voluntary and altruistic, right? And therefore, this is part of how we describe the particular form of love that exists between friends. Maybe. As we will explore throughout this chapter, whether your friendships are voluntarily chosen may be subject to specific limitations. A sociological approach to friendship helps us to think about the ways in which friendship, like many other behaviors in our society, is highly influenced by social structure. Because gender is an important part of social structure, it's key to understanding how much we actually *do* get to choose the people with whom we're friends.

In addition, to say that we expect nothing in return for friendship is probably a bit of an exaggeration. As we'll discover in friendships across gender lines, balance is an important part of how many of us define friendship (Allan, 1990). Friendship in this way of thinking is what exists between two equals, and whatever the particular system of exchange is in that friendship, a certain balance should be maintained.

You may have had a friendship in which you shared a great deal of intimate information with the other person but felt that the other person never really shared much intimate information with you. Or maybe you had a friend who constantly asked you for a ride or for help on a homework assignment and never seemed willing to help you out when you were in need of similar kinds of assistance. Both of these examples illustrate imbalance in a friendship, and for many of us, when the balance is off, friendships can be in trouble.

## Defining Friendship

One of the first tasks researchers who study friendship must tackle is to define exactly what friendship is. For now, we'll focus specifically on these definitions as they evolve where many sociologists do their research, in the global North. One common way of defining friendship is as a way of relating, usually characterized as voluntary and altruistic, as we discussed earlier. Friendship involves sentiment and sociability (Allan, 1990; Brain, 1976); we have some emotional attachment to our friends, and we like spending time with them merely for the sake of enjoying their company.

This concept of **sociability** comes from the social theorist Georg Simmel and is associated with friendship because it conveys the idea of being social purely for the sake of enjoyment, with no ulterior motive or specific content prescribed. While the point of dating someone may be to figure out if you want to spend your entire life with them and the point of spending time with your

children may be to socialize them, the point of spending time together with friends is just that—to spend time together as friends. When Lillian Rubin (1985) asked her respondents the abstract question, "What is a friend?" the idealized definition included trust, honesty, respect, commitment, safety, support, generosity, loyalty, mutuality, constancy, understanding, and acceptance.

A common definition of **friendship** in sociological literature is "a voluntary, informal, and personal relationship" (Allan, 1990, p. 17), although there are problems with this simple definition. We'll say more about how voluntary friendships are, but there are also questions about how informal and personal friendships are. Many friendships may form in formal settings, such as the workplace, and some friendships exist only within the context of those settings. In addition, Rubin's (1985) research on the reciprocity of people identified as friends casts some doubt on the personal nature of these relationships. Friendship is also more likely to be a relationship between status equals, two people on roughly the same social level. This helps with the idea of maintaining balance and reciprocity in a friendship relationship, and it is an issue we'll return to in our discussion that follows. Obviously, no two friends are perfectly equal in all things, but there's a general sense that equality is an important ideal to the voluntary coming together of two individuals as friends.

## MY FRIEND JANE VERSUS MY FRIEND JOE: WHO'S BETTER AT BEING FRIENDS?

Let's explore an interesting question on gender and friendship: Who's better at friendship, women or men? You can conduct your own informal survey to test this out, but chances are that in today's society, many people would give women the blue ribbon in the friendship competition. The characteristics of friendship emphasized in Anglo-European societies are intimacy, trust, caring, and nurturing (O'Connor, 1992). Who would most people identify as better at intimacy, trust, caring, and nurturing—women or men?

Psychologists and other researchers note that the "mask of masculinity" that men and boys are forced to wear makes forming intimate friendships difficult. This "boy code" equates masculinity with being emotionally stoic, invulnerable, physically tough, and independent. Intimacy and sharing, this belief system tells boys, are for girls or gay men; the friendships of men and boys are assumed to lack these qualities (Pollack, 1998; K. H. Rubin, 2002). As boys reach their adolescence and early adulthood, this "boy code" becomes the "guy code," documented by Michael Kimmel in his book *Guyland*. Young men ages 16 to 26 feel they need to shut down emotionally, suppress compassion, and inflate their ambition.

Niobe Way's (2011) research on boys' friendship confirms this transition. Before puberty, boys describe their relationships with their best friends as characterized by closeness and intimacy. One boy in his sophomore year of high school said of his best friend:

> Regardless of what happens, he will be there. There is nothing we don't do or say, there is nothing I can do or say that would make us less close than we are . . . yes, he is the only person that I know that I am never going to NOT have a relationship with, understand? . . . we love each other, we agree how we feel. (Way, 2011, p. 13)

Just a few years later, boys explain that they no longer have a best friend because, to quote Joseph, "you can't trust nobody these days" (Way, 2011, p. 19). Older boys describe being betrayed by friends and tend to naturalize their decreasing sense of closeness with male friends. Justin, a senior, when asked how his friendships had changed since he was a freshman, said:

> It's like best friends become close friends, close friends become general friends and then general friends become acquaintances. So they just. . . . If there's a distance, whether it's, I don't know, natural or whatever. You can say that but it just happens that way. (Way, 2011, p. 19)

Researchers like Way and Kimmel suggest there is nothing natural about this process but that it's a reflection of the dictates of hegemonic masculinity. If closeness and intimacy in friendship are associated with femininity, then boys must avoid it at all cost. Not only are older boys afraid to express emotion, but these young men feel effeminate if they even feel emotions (Kimmel, 2009). The picture that emerges from this research is one of men who become fairly incompetent at making, being, and keeping friends.

On the other hand, writer, social media celebrity, and feminist icon Roxane Gay (2014) wrote an essay-as-list titled "How to Be Friends With Another Woman." Item number one on the list reads, "Abandon the cultural myth that all female friendships must be bitchy, toxic or competitive. This myth is like heels and purses—pretty, but designed to SLOW women down" (p. 47). The list, as well as the need to write it, suggests a competing assumption that women are worse, not better, at friendships. What does social science research tell us about the nature of gender and friendship?

## Friendship in Historical Perspective

Not surprisingly, in historical perspective, the answer to the question of gender and friendship varies. In many time periods, men's friendships were viewed as the ultimate model, while women were seen as largely incapable of this higher form of association. The important characteristics linked to friendship in many historical writings are bravery, loyalty, duty, and heroism; Achilles is a good friend to Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad* because when his friend dies, he flies into a fit of grief, finally leaves the tent in which he's been waiting out the Trojan War, and cuts off the head of Patroclus's murderer.

These qualities are very different from some of the more contemporary ideas about friendship, but into the 19th century, "manly love" (Nardi, 1992, p. 41) was an important part of the definition of masculinity. Male factory workers exchanged letters in which they expressed intimacy and tenderness toward their male friends that would probably cause us today to assume they were romantically or sexually involved (Galliano, 2003).

Other references to the love experienced in men's friendship abound in Anglo-European history. In a biblical story, Jonathan "fell in love" with David, and his loyalty to his friend trumped both his political interests and his loyalty to family in the form of his father, King Saul, whose wishes he thwarted to help his friend (Brain, 1976). Benjamin Disraeli, prime minister of England during the 19th century, said of the friendships English boys

developed during their school years, "All the loves of after life can never bring its rapture, or its wretchedness; no bliss so absorbing, no pangs of jealousy or despair so crushing and so keen" (Brain, 1976, p. 42).

Women, on the other hand, were considered to be unable to commit to other women and incapable of forming close bonds. Women's friendships were perceived as likely to be easily abandoned in favor of male companionship and plagued by jealousy and competition over men (Johnson, 1996; Rose, 1995).

This view of women as too emotionally immature for friendship (which lingers as a cultural assumption into the 21st century, as we'll see) completely contradicts the research describing men as virtually incapable of participating in or sustaining friendship. Prior to this shift in models of friendship, women were thought to be unable to form the bonds necessary for friendship and were considered less capable of commitment. Women, so the story went, were likely to abandon female friends for the superior option of male companionship (Galliano, 2003).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 6.1

### FRENEMIES AND WOMEN'S FRIENDSHIPS ON REALITY TV

How much does the world of "reality" television tell us about, well, reality? Exactly how realistic are the behaviors of people on these shows? What kind of gender stereotypes does reality TV trade in?? What do reality shows such as *The Real Housewives of Orange County* or *The Real World* tell us about women's friendships? Shows like *The Real Housewives* generally focus on a group of wealthy women who are friends but who proceed to argue, backstab, and betray each other, usually culminating in a series of dramatic confrontations. The women on *Real Housewives* and other shows like *The Bachelor* are depicted as superficial and overly dramatic, more consumed with competing over men than with forming lasting relationships with each other. Depictions of women with complicated and healthy friendships are few and far between in popular culture today. You're more likely to encounter women with "frenemies," a portmanteau that combines "friend" and "enemy." The term refers to a person who pretends to be a friend in face-to-face interactions but is actually a competitor or rival (Rodgers, 2011). The term itself isn't gendered, but it seems most often to be applied to friendships among women. Psychologist Laura S. Brown (2005) worked as a consultant for one reality television show, and she was struck by the contrast between the complicated and generally likable people she interacted with in person and the edited portrayals she watched when the television show eventually aired. She believed that the producers, directors, and editors of many reality television shows portray a distorted gender reality to fit certain gender stereotypes. For example, strong women on reality television shows are often depicted as manipulative "bitches." In couple competitions like *The Amazing Race*, women in heterosexual couples are often made to appear domineering, insensitive, and pushy rather than simply more powerful than their male partners. When women try to outwit or outplay their competitors on shows like *Survivor*, they are labeled in online discussion boards as "two-faced," "manipulative," or "mean," while their male counterparts are perceived as merely engaging in a particular strategy for winning (Brown, 2005, p. 78). Reality shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* seem to

encourage contestants to act in deceptive and manipulative ways. Are there gender differences in the behaviors of female and male contestants on these shows? Do you think editors purposefully emphasize gender differences in their choices of which scenes to include? Do audiences respond differently to certain behaviors based on whether the person is a man or a woman? Do these shows reflect the reality of women's friendships or an exaggerated version edited to create higher ratings? What does the emergence of the term *frenemies* say about the state of friendship?

How do we account for this rather radical shift in the commonly perceived relationship between gender and friendship? First, as some researchers have pointed out, men's friendships, as with men's lives in general, were more public and therefore generally viewed as more important than the relationships in the private sphere of women in the past (Johnson, 1996). This is part of the general doctrine of separate spheres that we discuss more in Chapter 8 but that views the public sphere of politics and the economy as inherently masculine. It is only recently, and with the emergence of feminism, that what happens in women's lives has become important to research or to society in general.

Whether women actually were lousy at friendships is as subject to debate as the more recent conclusion that men are lousy at friendships, although the truth of women's historical status is more difficult to uncover; these women and their friends are no longer alive to tell their tales firsthand, and as we will see, talking in depth to people about their friendships can be an important way of uncovering the "truth" about friendships.

Women's friendships were less visible, but this view of women as inferior friends can also be understood as evidence of a long history of patriarchy in Western society. Women were considered to be inadequate to the task of forming friendships because friendships were important, and women were perceived as generally inferior at anything that society deemed important. This theory might also help us explain our current views of friendship. Perhaps women are now sometimes perceived as better at friendship precisely because friendship in general is viewed as less important than it was in the past.

## Gender Differences in Friendship

You shouldn't be surprised by now to learn that there are many contradictions and points of disagreement in research about men's and women's friendships. Even if the concept under study here, friendship, were fairly straightforward and easily defined, there are always different ways of approaching its relationship to gender. We'll start with the extensive body of literature on the gender differences that exist in friendship.

In Chapter 3, we discussed sex difference research, and there are a lot of studies on sex differences between women and men's friendships. As in our earlier discussion of sex difference research, it is worthwhile to note important similarities in women's and men's styles of friendships, as well as variations in friendship styles among different groups of women and different groups of men. In studies of the way women and men define what makes friendship, crucial similarities emerge. Both men and women generally want the same set of abstract qualities in their friends—intimacy, acceptance, trust, and help.

## Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side

The differences between men and women in relation to friendship are sometimes described by identifying women's friendships as "face-to-face" and men's as "side-by-side" (Nardi, 1992). Women tend to look for an intimate confidante with whom they can share their feelings, while men tend to seek someone with whom to share activities and interests. The **face-to-face** of women's friendships is then meant to describe the degree of conversation and emotional sharing that takes place in women's friendships. Men are **side-by-side** in that they are participating in activities together but not necessarily engaging in the kind of conversational intimacy that women engage in.

Interestingly, Deborah Tannen's (2001) video research of men and women talking to each other across different age groups demonstrates that face-to-face and side-by-side are also true in the spatial arrangement of men and women. In her study, she placed girls and boys across a range of ages (from young girls and boys to adolescents) in a room with a friend of the same gender and instructed them just to talk. Girls in the study consistently moved their chairs so that they could face each other in order to have a conversation. Most of the boys in her study, given the same instructions, moved their chairs not so they faced each other but into a side-by-side arrangement, and thus they did not look at each other as they talked (Tannen, 2001).

Some of the things women and men are looking for in a friend are different, and it therefore follows that the friendships they have are different. There is research on differences between self-disclosure in friendship that indicates that men are less likely to disclose intimate information about themselves to their friends than are women. It also seems that women are more uncomfortable when their friendships lack intimate self-disclosure than are men (Sherrod, 1989).

This research suggests that men are not as good at verbal intimacy, but other researchers have asked whether, perhaps, men's intimacy involves nonverbal cues and expressions. Perhaps men hug each other more or can read their friends' emotions through their facial expressions without the need for verbal self-disclosure. Evidence on this aspect of friendship indicates that women are also more comfortable with physical affection with their friends and feel they are better able to understand their friends through nonverbal communication (Sherrod, 1989). This is a fairly short list of the differences between women's and men's styles of friendship that researchers have reported.

If you remember our discussion of sex difference research in general from Chapter 3, although much work has been done documenting the many differences between women and men in countless behaviors and values, sex difference research spends less time attempting to explain these differences. In the area of friendship, this is less the case, and several different explanations attempt to account for the kinds of differences we observe between women and men. Many of these will be familiar to you from earlier chapters on theory, beginning with the importance of socialization to men's and women's orientation toward friendship. Socialization is the primary explanation used by Lillian Rubin (1985) in her comprehensive study of the differences between men's and women's friendships. In earlier chapters, we discussed several explanations for exactly how gender socialization happens, and Rubin draws mostly on psychoanalytic theory.

To explain gender differences in friendship, Rubin (1985) notes the importance of mothering to both boys and girls, meaning that for both boys and girls, their first and closest relationship is with a woman. Girls are able to develop a sense of femininity directly through their relationship with their mother, who is of the same gender. They never have to sever this close connection with their mothers to become feminine, and in their adult friendships, this makes connection with other women much easier. In psychoanalytic language, this is because women have relatively weak ego boundaries.

Boys, who are also deeply attached to their mothers at an early age, must learn masculinity. Psychoanalytic theory argues that boys learn masculinity by denying their connection to their mothers and so learn masculinity not through direct experience but by identifying with absent or less present fathers. Breaking their initial connection with their mothers means that boys have much more developed ego boundaries than their female counterparts. Later in life, these ego boundaries make connecting intimately with others more difficult, and this explains the emphasis on doing things together rather than talking, as well as the lack of self-disclosure and reduced affection in men's friendships. Among adult women and men, these early childhood patterns make connecting much easier for women than for men.

Another explanation that also relies on socialization emphasizes the specific content of masculinity as a gender identity. This particular view is in line with hegemonic masculinity, discussed in Chapter 2. Hegemonic masculinity sets up a certain bar men must meet to pass a kind of cultural masculinity test. The basic idea is that men feel some pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinities, and there are repercussions for straying too far from this dominant form of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity dictates that men be competitive and rational, and these qualities make intimate disclosure in friendships more difficult (Cohen, 2001).

If competition is an important aspect of demonstrating masculinity, then revealing your vulnerabilities and weaknesses to another man will probably not be an easy thing to do. In addition, in contemporary societies like the United States, hegemonic masculinity has a strong heterosexual component. Real men are not gay, and moreover, hegemonic masculinity suggests, regardless of whether all men follow it, that real men do not engage in any behavior that could in the least bit suggest any affection for other men. Close friendships and intimacy with other men introduce just that possibility—questions about a man's sexuality and suggestions of homosexuality (Nardi, 1992).

Rubin (1985) found in her study of friendship that men commonly associated male friendship with homosexuality. Although this has not always been the case (recall that in the 19th century, manly love was an important part of the definition of what it meant to be masculine), in our society, open and intimate expressions of emotion are often perceived as something gay men do and, therefore, are outside the bounds for men trying to conform to hegemonic masculinity. Boys learn the content of this gender identity at an early age through gender socialization, and this inevitably carries over into the way men relate with each other as friends into adulthood.

## Friendship and Social Structure

Institutional explanations of gender differences in friendships take an approach that emphasizes the importance of social structure. Men and women develop different types of friendships not

because of any internalized sense of gender identity but because of the social structure of their lives, including, but not limited to, gender as a social structure. As we will discuss, other social structures also impact the types of friendships men and women have as well as the content of those friendships. This explanation emphasizes the real constraints placed on friendships. Part of the reason sociologists ignored friendship for so long was the sense that our friends are largely a result of personal choice and, therefore, rooted in our idiosyncratic personalities.

But there are structural requirements to friendship that have little to do with our own personal friendship preferences. You have to meet someone before you can become friends with them, and that generally requires being in the same physical space. This may be changing with our increasingly networked lives online over Zoom and multiplayer video games, which allow all of us to potentially have many "friends" we have never met. But even if we go down the road of online relationships, there are certain structural constraints on friendship. If all of your friends are people you met playing *Fortnite*, you still have limited yourself to the set of people in the world who have access to the Internet and technology that allows them to play. You've automatically excluded a large percentage of the world's population from your potential friendship pool.

Geography generally provides one structural constraint on friendship, and at its simplest level, this means you're less likely to become friends with someone on the other side of the planet. But geography can matter even if you're in the same city or town, because most places around the world demonstrate differing levels of **social segregation**, which is simply the separation of some realm of social life into different groups based on a category.

**Residential segregation** describes this kind of separation in terms of where people live, and in the United States, communities are especially segregated by race and class. In other cities around the world, segregation based on religion or ethnicity may be more prominent. For many Americans (Latino, Black, Asian American, or white), although they may live within yards or feet of people of different racial backgrounds, socially constructed spatial boundaries can result in different groups rarely coming in contact with each other. In some areas of especially high poverty and racial segregation, inner-city residents may have never traveled outside the boundaries of their neighborhood. The chances that these individuals will become friends with someone of a different race or social class background are fairly low.

Social class background can constrain our friendship choices through geography and in other ways connected to our access to material resources. Have you ever had a friend who had significantly less or more money than you? Did it put a strain on the relationship? Research demonstrates that status inequality tends to put a strain on relationships in general, especially friendships (Harris, 1997). This is partly because friendships often contain a norm of equality, as we discussed briefly earlier. Friends can maintain the kind of balance necessary to a friendship if they are closer to equal, and inequalities tend to cause tensions.

Social class and racial or ethnic identity are two examples of social structural factors that can influence friendship. What about your body size? In one study of the relationship between friendship and body size, researchers found that as body mass index increased, the likelihood of being nominated by schoolmates as a friend decreased (Crosnoe et al., 2008). In other words, the larger the person, the less likely other people in the high school were to say that the person

was their friend. This relationship was more pronounced among girls than among boys, suggesting that the penalty for having a higher body mass index differs depending on gender. These differences persisted even when the researchers controlled for academic achievement and emotional distress. The findings suggest that in addition to where you live, the color of your skin, and how much money you have, how big or small you are dictates who your friends are.

## Can White Women and Black Women Be Friends? Race, Gender, and Friendship

Structural barriers make it less likely that you'll be friends with people who are very different from you racially, socioeconomically, and geographically. Still, it's not impossible. Are there other sticking points that get in the way of friendships across the lines of social categories? This is the question African-American writer Kim McLarin explores in her essay on whether Black women and white women can be true friends (McLarin, 2019).

"Generally speaking, it's not that I dislike white women," McLarin writes. "Generally speaking, it's that I do not trust them. Generally speaking, most black women don't." The two major themes in cross-racial friendships McLarin identifies in her informal survey of Black women from the ages of 20 to "well over 60" have to do with power and invisibility. Because of the privileges afforded them by their race, white women have power that many Black women do not. More than that, many white women have shown themselves unwilling to share that power with Black women. Though white women are among the biggest beneficiaries of affirmative action programs, they are also among the loudest and most insistent opponents of the programs. Many Black women, like McLarin, feel that when it matters most, white women choose race over gender, siding with white men over Black women.

True friendship requires reciprocal goodwill—a mutual acknowledgment of personhood. But many white women see Black women as a stereotype, a fantasy, a charity case, or an abstract threat. If white women cannot see Black women as fully human, then friendship becomes impossible. For many white women, Black women are framed either as the Angry Black Woman or the Black Superwoman, but both stereotypes render the real, human experiences of Black women invisible.

McLarin's personal experiences and anecdotal data are supported by research on cross-racial friendships. Studies reveal that race is an important influence on our perceptions of others, having an effect on the level of empathy, comfort, and trust between friends (Omi & Winant, 2014). While cross-racial friendships can be positive experiences, there are also barriers that can get in the way (Davies et al., 2011). Interactions across racial lines can sometimes include tension, anxiety, and stress, leading to negative outcomes (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Relationship dynamics common among Black peers—like playfulness, directness, and dominance—are often judged to be inappropriate and unintelligent by white people (Hecht et al., 2003). **Implicit racial biases** are the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes associated with someone of a different race. In addition to being associated with interpersonal discrimination, holding implicit racial biases also lowers the quality of cross-racial relationships (McConnel & Leibold, 2001).

In all these ways, race becomes a barrier to the formation and quality of friendships across racial lines. In the case of Black women and white women specifically, women's friendships are especially important as a source of support in coping with the stressors faced due to their

gender (Davis & High, 2019). When Black women are friends with white women, do they get the same support they receive from other Black women? One study of the support Black women expect and receive from their friendships demonstrates that they generally receive less support from cross-racial friendships than they do from same-race friendships. This is especially true in regard to identity support, or the extent to which friends accept and affirm an identity, even as part of a social group that has been challenged or threatened (Davis & High, 2019, p.192). This finding confirms McLarin's sense that the specific experiences of Black women are largely invisible to white women, making friendship difficult. This research reminds us that when we ask questions about women's and men's friendships, we should always consider which men or which women we're talking about.

## Gender Similarities in Friendship: But Are Women and Men Really All That Different?

An intersectional approach begins to suggest that perhaps there are flaws in any simple argument about who's better or worse about friendship or about gender differences in friendship in general. Research into sex or gender differences often relies on fairly small statistical differences between any behavior or predisposition in the two genders, describing what are mostly overlapping ways of acting and thinking. On average, men may be less likely to disclose intimate information in their friendships with other men, but that does not mean that a great number of men do *not* share their innermost feelings with their friends. Remember, one critique of research into sex or gender differences is that when we set out to look for something like a difference, we set up a predisposition to find it and make a big deal out of it, even if it's a relatively small difference.

For example, some research shows that women's friendships are significantly different from men's only for those women who do not work in the paid labor force or whose family takes priority over their paid work life (Walker, 1994). When middle-class women oriented toward their careers are compared with their male counterparts, both groups are more likely to report an aversion to being intimate with their same-gender friends.

These findings demonstrate the value of looking for differences within each gender (middle-class women are just as different from working-class women as they are from men) and suggest the importance of an individual's social-structural position in determining how gendered she or he acts and thinks. This is consistent with a belief that gender is largely about the particular position in the social structure that you happen to occupy.

There is further evidence to cast some doubt on the power and importance of gender differences in terms of friendship. When researchers examine longer-lasting friendships, the differences between women and men begin to disappear (Wright, 1998). This is also true as women and men age; friendships among elderly men and women also become more similar in many ways (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Roberto & Scott, 1989). Single men tend to be more involved with their male friends than are married men, especially married men with children (Cohen, 1992; Shulman, 1975); married men also report being less close to their friends and disclosing less to them than do their single counterparts (Fischer & Phillips, 1982; Tschann, 1988).

These differences carry through the life cycle, because older widowed men spend more time with their friends than do older married men (Powers & Bultena, 1976). In addition, across all

groups of men and women, regardless of their unique position in the social structure, many core values of friendship are shared across gender boundaries. Both women and men value trust and authenticity in their friendships, and their descriptions of ideal friendships focus on the importance of communication, intimacy, trust, and interpersonal sensitivity (Galliano, 2003).

## Are Our Friendships Really All That Different?

One interesting study of women's and men's friendships demonstrates how all the "differences" researchers have documented along the lines of gender may have to do with the particular method used to study friendships. Walker (1994) conducted in-depth interviews with 52 working-class and middle-class women and men in the United States using a referral system to include friendship pairings in her study. This means that all but three of her respondents had at least one other friend also interviewed as part of her study.

One methodological problem Walker sought to address in her study was the tendency to approach friendship by either asking respondents global questions about friendship or asking them to focus on best friendships. Global questions ask respondents to either describe friendships in the abstract ("How do you define friendship?" or "Do you think men's friendships differ from women's friendships?") or answer questions about their own experiences with friendship in general, as if all their friendships were similar. A global question of the second type would ask a respondent something like, "Are you likely to tell your friends when you are feeling sad or upset?" This question is difficult to answer because, although you may be likely to tell one particular friend when you're feeling sad or upset, you may never tell other people whom you still label friends.

In her study, Walker (1994) asked both global questions about friendship and a series of detailed questions about specific friendship relationships mentioned by the respondent. So in addition to asking her respondents whether they believed there were differences in men's and women's friendships, she asked them in great detail about their particular friendships.

Global questions, Walker argued, tell us a great deal about our cultural expectations of friendship, even when our actual experiences do not conform to those expectations. So when Walker asked her respondents about the differences between friendships among men and women, about 65% of them agreed with the dominant cultural ideology about gender and friendships. These individuals expressed a belief in the idea that women are more intimate and talk more in their friendships than men, who are more likely to engage in activities absent much sharing of feelings as compared to women.

These findings, on their own, confirm the idea that there are important differences between the ways women and men go about being and having friends. Walker's (1994) study got more interesting when she reported what her respondents said about their *actual* experiences in specific friendships. For example, one man in her study, when asked about what friendship is in general, gave a fairly stereotypical list of shared masculine activities. In masculine friendships, according to this respondent, men share activities such as "fishing, baseball, you know, maybe playing softball in the field, huntin'" (Walker, 1994, p. 249).

When Walker asked the same male respondent about the specific details of his friendships, she found he never went hunting or fishing with his male friends. His working-class lifestyle

with a wife and two children made it too difficult to find the time or financial resources to hunt or fish. When his male friends came over, they drank and watched TV together. The friends he socialized with most often were those he worked with as a janitor at the local high school, and with these friends, he discussed retirement, their wives, their children, and their shared interest in sports.

When Walker asked this same man what he had talked about with his closest friend at work that day, he revealed a conversation about their wives' preferences for courtship and physical intimacy. The respondent's wife liked spontaneity rather than planning as a prelude to sex, while his friend's wife liked going out to eat and shopping to set the scene for sex.

If you read a description of two friends discussing their partners' preferences for intimacy in this kind of detail, you'd probably assume the two friends were both women. This one instance among many documented by Walker demonstrates that respondents' experiences of friendship may not only fail to conform to the general trends identified in research but may also not conform to those same respondents' stated perceptions of what friendships are like.

These findings demonstrate a complex interplay between what society tells people they should do based on their assigned gender identity and their actual experiences as individuals in real friendships. Walker's study is an excellent example of the ways in which our ideologies sometimes contradict our actual experiences.

Walker (1994) found these contradictions to be just as true among the women she interviewed. When asked global questions about what women's friendships are like, women reported the ability to tell friends anything and rarely emphasized the importance of shared activities among women friends. Yet, similar to the men, 65% of the women Walker interviewed reported engaging in some behavior with their friends that did not conform to the dominant gender ideology.

Examples of these nonconforming behaviors included going to sporting events together, which women never mentioned unless Walker asked specifically whether they went to sporting events or played sports together. Although 25% of her female respondents worked out together, took aerobics classes together, or belonged to a local sports team, they defined the actual activities they were engaging in as unimportant. These sports activities were defined by the women as ways to spend time together and talk, and therefore, the specific content of these activities was considered unimportant. Another 15% of the women Walker interviewed reported friendship interactions that took place while the friends were engaged in some other activity. Many belonged to clubs of various sorts, and thus their activities together as friends centered on their activities in these clubs. These shared activities, as with many men's friendships, served as the basis of their friendship.

## The Intersectionality of Friendship and Gender

How did Walker (1994) explain these findings, which seem to radically contradict much of the research we've already discussed on gender differences in the friendships of women and men? She argued that social class needs to be taken into account when examining gender differences in friendships. We have already discussed some ways in which social class can have important impacts on the number of friends, who those friends are, and what you do with those friends.

Walker suggested that the friendships of professional men and professional women oriented toward their jobs tend to be similar. These groups of people tend to be geographically mobile, as in the case of a doctor moving from medical school to residency to her first job, and this makes friendships more difficult to maintain.

In addition, once these middle-class people find themselves in professions such as medicine, making new friends to replace the ones they physically left behind becomes increasingly difficult. One female doctor interviewed by Walker talked about both the lack of time for making friends and the difficulty of forming professional friendships in the highly competitive world of medicine.

Finally, Walker pointed out that women like this doctor assume that friends should be peer equals; they assume that their friends will be of roughly the same status. As professional and middle-class individuals move up the social ladder in terms of their income, education, and prestige, they find there are fewer and fewer status equals from whom to choose in their network of acquaintances.

These factors impact the friendships of professional men and women in similar ways. They help to explain the reluctance to disclose intimate information among many professional women, first because, like professional men, these women work in competitive careers that make establishing intimacy (and therefore vulnerability) with a potential rival difficult. Intimacy is also more difficult for professional women because an intimate relationship is assumed to require some time to develop. The professional women Walker interviewed required time to develop intimacy in a friendship, and this time was consumed by their work and therefore not available to spend on friends.

This lack of time was even more of a problem for professional women who were married with children, as well as for professional men with wives and children. When professional women did better fit the stereotypes about women's friendships, they were generally women who stayed at home with small children and therefore had friends drawn from their neighborhoods rather than from their workplaces. Walker suggested that these women had more opportunities to see their friends alone rather than in the more public space of the work world, and this made for more opportunities for intimate discussion. This finding points to the importance of not just one's social status as working class or middle class but also one's position either inside or outside the world of paid employment.

The influence of social class on the lives of working-class women and men also seemed to be more important than gender differences. Working-class respondents tended to have fewer friends than their middle-class counterparts but to have had those fewer friends longer. Remember that research shows that many of the differences between men's and women's friendships disappear with the length of the friendship, and so it makes sense that both female and male working-class individuals reported talking to their friends about intimate matters. This makes intuitive sense in that the longer you've been friends with someone, the more likely you probably are to tell him or her intimate things about yourself.

Working-class women and men saw their friends more frequently and more informally in each other's homes or neighborhoods, and they therefore knew much more about each other's lives than did their middle-class counterparts. Interestingly, Walker (1994) noted that the lives of working-class women and men contained many more of what most of us would consider problems; her working-class respondents talked more about financial difficulties, substance abuse problems, family problems, and health issues than middle-class respondents. But Walker argued that, in part because of the ability working-class

individuals had to discuss their problems with their more intimate, longtime friends, their lives were more stable in many respects than those of middle-class individuals in her study.

Walker's (1994) research demonstrated some of the potentially misleading traps in an approach that begins with an assumption of gender differences in friendships. If her research had asked respondents only to describe their own sense of gender and friendship, their responses would have confirmed the dominant ideology about men and women in friendship. How these men and women behaved in their actual friendships was more complicated.

Walker emphasized the ways in which her research revealed the ongoing social construction of gender in daily life and was, therefore, drawing on the doing-gender approach we discussed in Chapter 2. A doing-gender approach borrows from the tradition of ethnomethodology to excavate the ways in which gender is a performance we stage constantly in our everyday interactions. Here, gender is not internal to individuals but located in the realm of interaction. A "successful" performance of gender does not have to conform to some long and complicated cultural rulebook but only has to be perceived as accountable by everyone involved in the interaction.

Walker argued that her research was an especially good example of this aspect of doing gender; we can violate the dominant gender ideology in our friendships without really compromising either our own sense of ourselves as gendered or others' sense of us as feminine or masculine. In the cases we discussed previously, both women and men violated the norms for friendship perceived as appropriate to their gender and that they themselves claimed to perceive as appropriate to their gender. And yet none of these respondents seemed to believe that these violations meant that they were not really a man or a woman. That one woman in Walker's study didn't disclose private information to her female friends did not cause her to doubt her femininity. Instead, she adjusted her own understanding of masculinity (regarding it as gossipy) and defined herself in opposition to that version of masculinity.

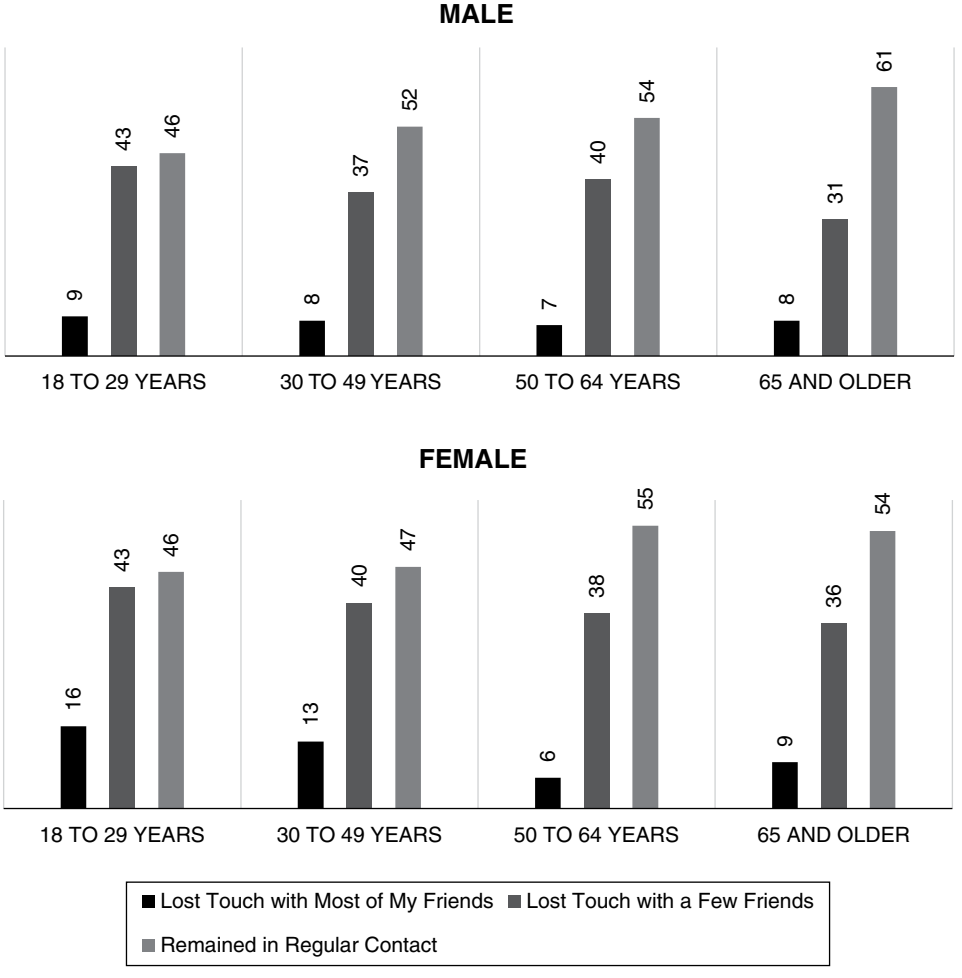
In one interesting case among three working-class women in Walker's study, one woman in the friendship triad was reluctant to disclose information and was urged by the other two friends to overcome this tendency, which they viewed as a failing on her part. Walker pointed out that the friends doing the urging to be more disclosing recreated ideas about femininity, pressuring their reluctant friend to conform while allowing for their friend's deviation without questioning her underlying femininity. In this dynamic, one woman's choice to deviate from the feminine norm for friendship was a clear violation of gender norms but did not affect her ability to be accountable as a woman. In fact, her violation served as an opportunity for her female friends to reaffirm this norm as important by urging her to conform. This example demonstrates that gender can be accomplished interactionally even when people are not following the rules prescribed by our dominant gender ideology.

## FRIENDSHIP IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

If friendship is a difficult concept to define when we confine ourselves to the developed world and the more limited context of the United States, imagine how confusing friendship becomes when we examine these relationships across a wide variety of cultures. The English language has essentially one word for friendship, which disguises the great variety of relationships that

we fit under that single term. Some researchers suggest that this paucity of language to describe friendship reflects the historical decline of friendship as an institution in the United States. The percentage of adults reporting that they have no close friends rose from 3% in 1990 to 12% in 2021 (Survey Center on American Life, 2021). Americans also talk to their friends less often than they did in the past and are less likely to rely on their friends for social support (Survey Center on American Life, 2021). Obviously, the social isolation experienced during the pandemic hasn't helped with building our friendships. Figures 6.1 and 6.2 demonstrate some of the gender and age differences in how the pandemic affected friendships.

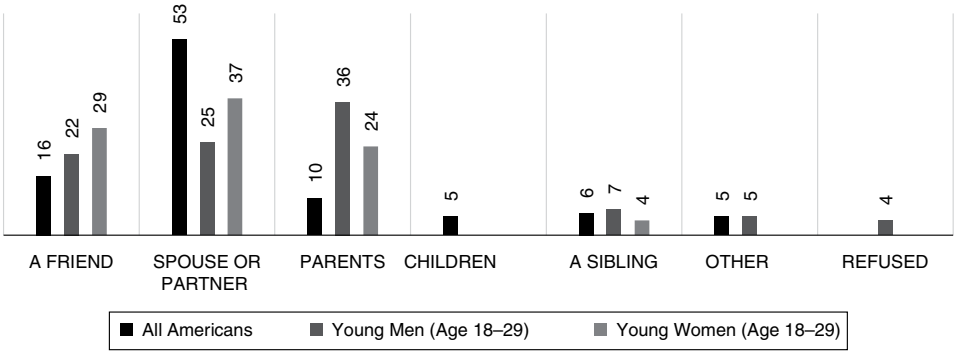
**FIGURE 6.1 ■ Young Women Most Likely to Report Losing Touch With Friends During the Pandemic**




*Source:* Data adapted from American Perspectives Survey, May 2021. https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/

*Note:* Figure may not add to 100% due to rounding. Survey of US adults [*N* = 2,019].

**FIGURE 6.2 ■ Young Men Rely More on Parents for Personal Support**




*Source:* Data adapted from American Perspectives Survey, May 2021. https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/

*Note:* Figure may not add to 100% due to rounding. Survey of US adults [*N* = 2,019].

## Choosing Your Friends

Globally, friendships are similar to those in places like the United States in that they are assumed to involve a sense of sentiment and loyalty. In most cultures, the relationships that most resemble friendship are composed of individuals who like each other and have a sense of obligation to each other's welfare; this is consistent with the ways in which we've already described friendship. We've seen how friendships aren't completely voluntary in Anglo-European society but instead dictated by the constraints of social structure. The same is true on a global scale.

For example, in Cameroon, among the Bangwa people, children are given both a friend and a wife upon their birth. Among the Sarakatsani, a group of herding peoples who live in mainland Greece, men develop friendships only with their first cousins. In New Guinea, friends are often selected from the men your sisters marry, and so your friend is likely to also be your brother-in-law (Brain, 1976).

The idea of having someone else pick your friend for you seems to contradict the most basic notions of what a friend is. On the other hand, we are expected to feel sentiment and loyalty for a whole group of people whom we by and large also do not choose to be socially attached to: our family. The notion that sentiments like love, for both friends and romantic partners, can evolve only when the person to be loved is freely chosen is not a universally shared notion. As we will discuss in the context of dating, our standard model in the United States is that love evolves as part of a careful process of sorting people out, whether friends or lovers, to find the *right* person to love.

The voluntary nature of friendship differs across cultures, as do the institutions and ceremonies that surround friendship. In the United States, we have few, if any, rituals that celebrate friendship. The closest thing we have is the relationship of godparents or, among Latinx people, *compadrazgo*, which translates as "coparents." Among Latinx people in the United States and in many Latin American cultures, the compadrazgo relationship cements a preexisting friendship

between the godparents and biological parents of the child. At the child's baptism, the friendship between the parents and godparents is ritualized through the church and becomes institutionalized as compadrazgo; the friends become **fictive kin**, or symbolic family members. Godparents are common among non-Latinx Catholics as well, although these relationships tend to place more emphasis on the godparents' responsibilities to the child rather than on their relationship with the child's parents.

These rituals evolved during the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church sought to incorporate what had already existed as a pagan blood ritual. Priests performed a ceremony to sacralize (make sacred) a friendship, and the ritual included the literal mixing of blood. The blood ritual in the church is long gone, but the tradition of godparents and compadrazgo persists as one of the few rituals celebrating friendship in places like the United States. Blood ceremonies are common in many cultures as a way to cement friendships ritually, and their importance stays with us through terms like *blood brothers*. A ritual exchange of blood symbolically makes friends into kin and gives a magical property to the friendship; if you share blood with a friend, then any potential betrayal of that friend could poison your very veins, according to the beliefs of some cultures.

In a global context, as in Anglo-European societies until relatively recently, friendships within genders are generally more common than cross-gender friendships, and this is especially true of relationships that are institutionalized in some way. Many early explorers and missionaries traveling outside the Anglo-European world misidentified many of these same-gender relationships as involving sexual contact. This was especially true for cultures that institutionalized same-gender friendships through various kinds of marriage ceremonies. Among the Nzema of southern Ghana in Africa, men will sometimes marry other men. In two ethnographic accounts of these institutions, two men meet, and one finds the other attractive, often meaning physically attractive. In one account, an older man was especially impressed by the beauty of a younger man's hands. In another, one man married another to "have a beautiful person near him" (Brain, 1976).

Similar woman–woman marriages occur among the Bangwa, where a woman becomes the "husband" to another woman by paying bride wealth to her family. In the case of woman–woman marriage, the "husband" has the additional advantage of having legal rights to the children of her legally sanctioned wife. How exactly does the wife in a woman–woman marriage produce children? She may come with her own children from a previous marriage, who legally become the "husband's" upon marriage. But woman–woman marriages also largely do not involve sex between the two women, and they allow for the wives to have sex freely with men. The woman who takes these wives gains legal rights to children as well as an additional source of help and potential income in her household.

Thinking about these relationships serves as a good way to begin considering an important question we raised at the beginning of the chapter: Where do we draw the line between friendship and other types of relationships that involve love and affection? Marriage is an institution that we in the United States associate with romantic love (another relatively recent phenomenon), but does marriage have to involve romantic love? In our language, reflecting its clear privileging of romantic love over other forms, when do *just friends* become something *more than*

*friends*? The cases of man–man and woman–woman marriages demonstrate that although we believe the lines between friend, family, and lover are clear-cut and easy to draw, making these distinctions may not always be so simple.

## Families of Choice

In the United States, research suggests that friendships among those in the LGBTQ+ community may be even more important than those among straight people, serving as an example of the blurred lines between friends and family. Like people in the Mexican American community, many gay men and lesbians use friends to form fictive kin or **families of choice**. Like fictive kin, families of choice refers to the construction of elaborate friendship networks to compensate for the lack of supportive family ties (Blair & Pukall, 2014; Braithwaite et al., 2010; Dewaele et al., 2011). These families of choice are composed of partners, former partners, and friends as well as biological family members. These family structures are especially important to those within the LGBTQ community because they have often been denied access to support from families of origin due to rejection or geographical distance as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals move to join communities composed of those with similar backgrounds (Murraco, 2006; Williams et al., 2016).

Similar dynamics may explain the fictive kin phenomena among immigrant communities and among LGBTQ individuals; minority stress theory proposes that both groups are likely to experience rejection as a result of their marginalized statuses (Gillespie et al., 2015). Like biological families, these families of choice cross lines of gender and sexual orientation.

One study explored families of choice through focusing on the relationships between lesbian women and straight men as well as ties between gay men and straight women (Murraco, 2006). For both types of cross-gender, cross-sexual identity dyads, friends relied on each other for financial and emotional support. Consistent with the concept of families of choice, these financial and emotional ties led friends to expect familial-like levels of commitment. Friends repeatedly referred to each other as like family and often consciously shaped their relationships around the needs of friends. Brenda, one of the lesbian respondents, said of her straight male friend, "I said at the time that I wanted us to think of ourselves as more like family" (Murraco, 2006, p. 1318).

Differences emerged in this study as these friends imagined how their relationships would change over the life course. Both types of friendship dyads imagined growing old together, even if the content of those fantasies was different. Ruth, a straight female friend of Scott, explained that she would live in a cottage down the hill from Scott and his longtime partner, Bradley. Other friends imagined sitting on the porch together, scaring off all the neighborhood kids.

Marriage transitions did sometimes affect these friendship dynamics. Straight women mentioned the ways in which getting married affected their promise to be surrogates for their gay male friends. Nadia had promised she would bear a child for her gay friend, Connor, but now said, "Now that I'm married, it is different . . . I have no idea what my husband would think if I wanted to have a baby for Connor. He'd probably not go for that very well, you know?" (Murraco, 2006, p. 1319). Gay men valued being able to participate in family life and interact with children through their straight female friends. But they also sometimes worried about how

their friendship would change when their straight female friends settled down into a more traditional family life. Here's how Connor expressed his concern:

> [Nadia's] going to make me an uncle one day. Well, depending on where they are living. Although that's what I worry about too, just because people change. Being gay in a gay relationship, you sort of stay the same as your other gay friends—But when you're married—things are different. Then you have kids and your life goes in other directions. (Murraco, 2006, p. 1320)

Murraco argues that her research demonstrates that not just lesbian women and gay men engage in families of choice, but their straight friends do as well. These types of relationships have the power to transform our ideas about what both friendship and family mean.

## THE RULES OF ATTRACTION

When we move from the world of friendship to other types of relationships, the picture gets even messier. Friendship is a concept that we can at least roughly translate into a global perspective. We may have to make necessary adjustments for friendships that are less voluntary and that sometimes blur the lines between friendship and other types of intimacy, such as the man–man marriages among the Bangwa. But when we begin to discuss other types of intimacy as they exist in Anglo-European societies, a global perspective becomes much more difficult.

This potential for messiness can be pretty easily demonstrated if we ask what seems like a fairly basic question: What makes people attractive to each other? Surely, this is an important and fairly simple component of relationships that lead to things like dating and marriage. People need to be attracted to each other before they decide to date or get married, right? Well, not really, as we'll see. But let's stick with the basic idea of attraction. What makes people appear physically attractive to other members of their society?

The answer to that question all depends on where and when you are. As we'll discuss in more detail in the next chapter on gender and bodies, thinness is generally valued as an attractive quality for women in the United States, and perhaps increasingly for men as well. But if you've been to an art museum and have seen paintings of women from previous time periods, you may have noticed that few of those women would do very well on *America's Next Top Model* or *Project Runway*.

Nor would thinness get you very far in places like Brazil, where, until beauty values imported from the United States came to have greater influence, the ideal woman was shaped like a guitar rather than a fence pole. Among the Padaung of Burma, attractiveness in women is tied to the length of their necks; women use a series of rings added throughout their lives to elongate their necks artificially. In some places (increasingly including some segments of the U.S. population), piercings and perforations of the body are considered the height of attractiveness. Among the long list of attractive features across the globe are stretched lips and earlobes, filed teeth, and flattened skulls (Turner, 2003).

Physical attraction in global perspective poses its own set of problems, but when you include emotional elements of attraction, the discussion becomes even more convoluted. This is a result

of the problematic notion of romantic love and exactly how it fits into the structure of a larger society. In the United States, we generally believe in a thing called romantic love. You could say we've built up something of a cult following around the phenomenon. We have at least one holiday solely devoted to the ideal of romantic love in Valentine's Day (and two if you count the more recent addition of Sweetheart's Day). Add to that countless books, movies, television shows, Internet sites, songs, plays, and magazines, and an outsider might wonder whether people in the United States think about much of anything *but* romantic love.

In the United States, romantic love has been conceived of as primarily heterosexual and as something that, at least in the happily-ever-after version, eventually leads to marriage. A more global definition of **romantic love** is an intense attraction in which the love object is idealized, there is an erotic context, and the relationship is expected to be long-lasting (Jankowiak & Fischer, 1992, p. 150). Anthropologists debate whether this particular ideal, which some cultures find so central to their lives and happiness, even exists outside Anglo-European cultures (Smith, 2001). The debate about whether romantic love is universal is ongoing, but even if we assume for the moment that it is, there are still variations in how romantic love lines up with other societal institutions across the world.

In many parts of the global North, the assumption is that romantic love comes before marriage, and being in love is like the green light to proceed to marriage, at least for those who are heterosexual and invested in getting married. This ordering is different in other cultures, where romantic love is something assumed to come after marriage—if it's appropriate at all to feel in a marriage. Marriage is an economic or political arrangement; love and intimacy are to be found in friends or other relatives but not with the person you will marry or to whom you're already married. This makes discussing romantic love complicated, and so we'll start with a brief history of Anglo-European traditions before discussing the increasing influence of this idea in other parts of the world.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 6.2

### SWIPING RIGHT: TINDER, ONLINE DATING, AND GENDER FLUIDITY

If you don't know what it means to "swipe right," you probably haven't been introduced to Tinder, the latest intersection of technology, romance, and sexuality. The app distills online dating to its most basic level with a simplified profile and photos. Once you sign up, the app shows you photos of singles based on your preferences, and you either swipe left if you like them or swipe right if you don't. There's some debate about whether Tinder is useful for those looking for more than a hookup, with definite gender dynamics that emerge. One investigation found that 60% of women on Tinder indicated in their profiles that they were interested in more than a hookup (Borrello, 2015). In a world of increasing options regarding sexuality and gender identity, how does Tinder stand up? When Zach Stafford (2015), a columnist for *The Guardian*, changed his Tinder status from male to female, he saw a lot more activity. Many men who swiped right without looking (and therefore didn't realize they were swiping a man) sent him homophobic messages, though many more ignored him. In similar

gender experiments, other men reported hostility but also some curiosity from supposedly "straight" men (Cruz, 2015). When Eliel Cruz changed his gender from male to female, he received some complimentary responses from men, as well as offers from other men to have sex with him as long as he didn't do any of that "gay shit." These reactions suggest that at least for some men, a fluid sexuality is becoming more acceptable. On the other hand, users have reported that when they attempt to identify as transgender on Tinder, they end up banned from the app (Stafford, 2015). This is especially ironic given that Tinder links your account to Facebook, which currently provides 58 gender options. OkCupid, another online dating app, has added expanded gender options for users. The new app Thurst is designed specifically for queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people (Dickey, 2015). How would you design a dating app open to people of all gender identities and sexualities? How have dating apps changed our expectations about dating, romance, and sexuality?

## Courtship to Dating: A Brief History

On some college campuses, dating may already be becoming a thing of the past thanks to the emergence of a new hookup culture, which we discuss later. If dating is, in fact, on its way out, it will have been just another transformation in a long list of the ways in which rituals of dating and courtship have changed rapidly since about the 18th century. In her history of courtship and dating in the United States, Beth Bailey (1988) describes the specific gender and social class implications of transformations in our romantic rituals during the 20th century. Looking at how courting institutions have changed over time and the gender implications of those changes is a good example of an institutional approach. Approaching dating this way focuses our attention on how a social structure—in this case, courtship as an institution—has an impact on how people experience their gender. Like other institutional approaches, it's a top-down perspective on gender.

During the 19th century in America, there was no such thing as dating as we generally think of it today. The word *date*, used in the context we're using it here as a potentially romantic encounter, probably got its first use around 1896 (Bailey, 1988).

Before then, courtship in 19th-century America involved men coming to call at the homes of their potential love interests, a form of courtship appropriately named **calling**. The men were called suitors, as you'll know if you've seen *Gone With the Wind* or other movies that depict this often highly formalized process of courtship. Men came to women, and couples rarely *went* anywhere; instead, they spent the evening chaperoned by their parents, usually on the front porch or in the family parlor. In addition, a man could not come calling on a woman unless she had invited him to do so and he had received the approval of her mother. For a man to *ask* permission to call on his love interest was highly inappropriate, and advice columns of the time period cautioned young men against taking this step.

In this way, the process of courtship was initiated by women rather than by men. Courting took place mostly in the private realm of the girl's home, and this was a woman's world. A family's prestige and social standing came from the father's position in society, but during the late 19th century, the separation of the spheres was well underway, and so the household was considered to be a woman's domain. The system of calling was almost entirely under the control of women.

The particular courtship system of calling on a young woman had its widest prominence among the middle and upper classes in the United States. Bailey (1988) argued that the system evolved in part out of social class motives, as a way for the middle and upper classes to maintain some control over their daughters' marriages in an age when telling who was who was becoming increasingly difficult. With industrialization, the strict social class hierarchies that had existed in many places in the United States were beginning to fade, and people were beginning to move around more, both socially and geographically. This made discovering whether a young man was the "right" kind of person to bring into the family increasingly difficult to do.

Calling allowed mothers, as the social gatekeepers of the family, to patrol the appropriateness of suitors through the ever-useful convention of being "not at home." According to the detailed rules of courting, a young man who came calling could be told, usually by the maid who answered the door, that the lady in question was not at home. A young man deemed less than desirable by a mother or daughter would be told that the young lady was not at home regardless of whether this happened to be true. In this way, women were conveniently able to screen potential suitors and to subtly send the message that a caller's hopes of courting the young woman were not going to be fulfilled.

Although those in the lower classes might have aspired to the system of calling and were certainly influenced by it, it was more difficult if not sometimes impossible for them to participate in the same way as the middle and upper classes. Calling required space—a parlor, front porch, or some room where the courting couple could ideally sit together, chaperoned by the parents or with chaperones close by in the next room. Working-class families, especially those crowded together in urban neighborhoods, had no such space for entertaining in their homes. During the early period of industrialization in the United States, many of the factory workers were single women, usually recent immigrants or farmers' daughters who were sent to work in the factories until they married while their brothers worked the farm.

These factory girls usually lived in one room in a boarding house or apartment and certainly had no space for a gentleman caller. Although one magazine from the time period tells of one group of factory girls' creative attempt to create such a space by pooling their resources to rent a room to share for hosting callers, this option was out of the reach of many working-class families. Many women of the lower class, especially those of the new waves of immigrant families, simply desired to escape out of the house and into the freedom of the public world, even if the possibility of calling *was* available to them.

Dating, on the other hand, emerged first from the lower classes; it then trickled up into the upper classes and, finally, down into the middle classes. The transition happened fairly quickly, but it certainly would not have been an easy one for many middle- and upper-class women. The doctrine of separate spheres at this time enforced a strict division between the world of the home and the public world outside those doors. Working-class girls worked in factories, but the rest of the public realm was perceived as deeply inappropriate for women. Dance halls, restaurants, and movie houses were not places where respectable women of the middle and upper classes went. When upper-class women did go out, they went to private parties with carefully selected guest lists or to the movie houses for private parties from which the general public was excluded.

Dating moved the act of courtship into the public world, a world that was defined as masculine at the time and, therefore, not the proper place for women to be. Privileged young women of the upper classes eventually came to realize the advantages offered to them by dating and being able to experience more fully the increasing commercial amusements of urban life. Working-class women had been dating in dance halls and restaurants for a while, and eventually, these trends affected the behaviors of the middle class as well.

Dating moved courtship out of women's realm inside the home and into the public realm of men. Power in courtship shifted from women to men in another way with the emergence of dating. Dating added a whole new economic twist to the question of courtship. In the past, the economic standing of a potential suitor had obviously been important, and it was one factor that was probably often used to weed out potential husbands. But the act of courting itself didn't require any output of money; when you visited a woman in her home, you didn't have to pay for or buy anything.

With dating, this situation changed. Suddenly, courting a woman required a significant outlay of cash, and during this transition period (and perhaps still today), men often deeply resented the financial burden that came with a woman's company. Bailey (1988) pointed out that one usage of the word *date* during this early time period was to describe a visit to a prostitute. Bailey argued, and some letters in popular magazines of the time from men agree, that dating became a system of exchange similar to that of prostitution in that men were essentially paying for the time they spent with a young woman.

The young men of the time were not particularly happy about this new system of exchange. In a letter to *American* magazine, one man stated that he had spent more than $5,000 on dates that year and had come to the conclusion that female companionship, as pleasant as it might be, was not worth that price. What men received in exchange for this outlay of money, Bailey (1988) argued, was new power in the realm of courtship. It may have cost them more, but the outlay of money could carry certain expectations of reciprocity from the young woman in the form of "favors," including sexual favors.

Power shifted toward men under dating also in that it became the responsibility of men to pursue women through asking them out on dates. Remember, under the rules of calling, a man could visit a young woman only upon receiving her invitation. As dating evolved, it became clear that women were, under no circumstances, to ask a man out on a date. This, too, was tied to the economics of dating. Although there was some confusion about this reversal in the first 20 or so years of the transition from calling to dating, advice columnists strictly instructed women never to suggest a date to a man; men bore the financial responsibilities of the date, and so suggesting a date was inappropriate for a woman because you were asking a man to spend money on you (Bailey, 1988). Under the system of dating as it evolved, and still to a large extent today, women were left to sit around and wait to be asked on a date.

Nonetheless, from roughly the beginning of the 20th century on, dating was the predominant mode of courtship in the United States. The term has become fairly blurred in its meaning over time, in part because of the ways in which exactly what it means to date have continually shifted. In the early part of the 20th century, dating among teenagers was primarily about volume rather than about the length or quality of an individual relationship. Girls and boys

dated many different people in what sociologist Willard Waller (1937) called the **rating-dating-mating complex**. Dating was based on a system of ranking in which both boys and girls aspired to date someone whom they rated as a bit higher than themselves in terms of dating desirability, thus using dating to raise their own status. The competition was with peers of the same gender, because girls increased their status among other girls by being able to date higher-status boys and by being perceived as good dates.

A problem Waller identified was that the definition of a "good" date, toward which both girls and boys were aspiring, was very different depending on your gender. For girls, a good date preserved her reputation by not leading her to engage in any sexual activity, while for boys, a good date meant gaining sexual experience and sophistication. In this model of dating, the goal was to improve your status and create a reputation for yourself as a good date, and this was accomplished by dating a lot of people.

The rating-dating-mating complex may sound a bit cutthroat to you, or perhaps it doesn't depending on your own experiences with dating. Where's the love and passion in this system of using dates to increase your status? Willard argued that affection and love didn't have much to do with this particular system of dating, nor was it necessarily about finding a compatible individual to marry. Dating in this time period was primarily a way to make yourself more popular, and in this sense, dating had less to do with romantic love.

Historians of courtship argue that this changed during the period around World War II, when dating became less about a continual parade of boys or girls and morphed into **going steady**. Bailey (1988) provided evidence of this transition in a magazine story from the time in which an older uncle asked his niece about her experiences at prom. His question, "Dance with a lot of boys?" reflected the old rating-dating-mating system of dating, where a girl's goal at a dance would have been to be continually dancing with many different partners (p. 32).

The worst imaginable fate for a young woman under the old system of dating would have been getting stuck dancing with one boy. This meant you were not desirable enough for another boy to cut in on your partner, and as you could not leave the dance floor yourself, both you and the boy were stuck in the undesirable position of having to dance only with each other. By the time of the magazine story about the uncle and his niece, the niece couldn't imagine why you would dance with anyone besides your date at the prom—one dance partner for the whole of the evening. To date someone came to mean a long-term relationship rather than a competitive system for establishing popularity.

These changes were brought about in part as a result of the demographics of the time period. During World War II, there were suddenly fewer men available to date and thus fewer men to cut in on the women on the dance floor and to date in general. In this new social reality, there was more incentive to hold on to the few men who were available through going steady. Demographically, this points to the importance that the gender makeup of a society (the relative number of marriageable or fertile women and men) can have on dating and marriage practices.

Another explanation for the shift toward going steady is the important fact that dating, throughout its brief history, has been thought of as training wheels for marriage or for life in general. Rating-dating-mating was perceived as good training into the highly competitive world of adulthood. Beginning in the early part of the 20th century, the idea of sexual compatibility

in marriage began to gain importance. Today, the assumption that a healthy sex life is an important part of a successful marriage is fairly widespread, but that's a relatively recent idea, dating back to the period between the two world wars in the 1930s, when advice books began to emphasize the importance of good sex to a successful marriage (Hawkes, 1996).

Going steady, although it initially made many parents nervous, was partly a response to these changes in the demands of marriage. If being able to have a healthy sex life was now going to be important to marriage, it made sense for couples to be able to have some sexual experiences prior to marriage. Although that's not to say sexual encounters didn't occur under the rating-dating-mating complex; if sex were commonplace under that system, it would have led to quite a bit of sex with multiple partners. And in a period before the widespread use of the birth control pill among women, that could have had some interesting consequences in unplanned pregnancies.

But if a boy and a girl went steady for a long time and experimented sexually with a long-term partner, the behavior looked a lot more like what we expect from marriage today. Sex is retained, at the very least, as something that happens within the context of a long-term, monogamous relationship—even if it's not quite marriage per se. The ideal during this period was still that young people should wait to have sex until marriage, and especially that *women* do so. But going steady made some sexual experimentation prior to marriage OK, as good practice for the sexual compatibility that would be necessary in marriage.

What does dating mean now, and what gender implications does the current system of dating have? When you say you're dating, are you more likely to mean you've been seeing one person exclusively in a long-term relationship or that you're going out on dates with several people in succession or perhaps at the same time? When we have these conversations in my gender classes, there often seem to be competing and sometimes contradictory definitions of what dating means. This is in part because many of the historical meanings of dating have stuck with us; for some students, it's still more like rating-dating-mating, while for others, it's more about going steady. In addition, we have to throw in the broad terrain of contemporary slang to describe the complicated relationships between adolescents and young adults. A brief sample tells us that you can be "talking," "talking to," "hanging out," "seeing," "hooking up," or, as is increasingly popular, "friends with benefits."

## Hookups

Is the hookup the next phase in the evolution of courtship or just a new name for an old behavior? Hookups are probably familiar to many students on college campuses; a survey study of students at 55 northeastern colleges and universities in 2000 found that greater than three-fourths of respondents had experienced at least one hookup (Paul et al., 2000).

What exactly is a hookup? In this particular study, **hookups** were defined as a sexual encounter, usually lasting only one night, between two people who were strangers or brief acquaintances. For the purposes of this study, a hookup included some physical sexual interaction, although not necessarily sexual intercourse. In one survey, only about one-third of college students had sexual intercourse as part of their most recent hookup. Another third involved oral

sex or manual stimulation, and the final third included only kissing and nongenital touching (Armstrong et al., 2018).

So far, hookups have been studied largely within the context of college campuses, which are already characterized by more sexual permissiveness relative to other parts of society as well as patterns of sexual activity that may include multiple partners (Paul et al., 2000). Casual sex on or off college campuses is not new, but is the pattern of hooking up something different than mere casual sex? Some evidence suggests that hooking up is increasing at the same time that dating is declining. One study reported that only half of college women had been on six or more dates during college, while a third had been on no more than two (Vanderkam, 2001).

Still, by their senior year, 69% of heterosexual students had been in a relationship that lasted at least six months, which suggests that hookups have not replaced being in a committed relationship. In fact, some hookups lead to committed relationships, based on a negotiation of exclusivity and agreement on naming each other "girlfriend" or "boyfriend" (Armstrong et al., 2018).

It's also important to note the air of moral panic that often exists around the topic of hookups in popular culture and the media. A **moral panic** is an overheated, short-lived period of intense social concern over an issue. The classic moral panic was the fear of Halloween candy spiked with razor blades or poison that happened in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Researchers have documented that only two instances of poisoned candy ever happened, both of which involved family members rather than strangers while trick-or-treating. Still, all candy is now individually wrapped in direct response to this moral panic.

In the media, discussions of hookups often focus on fears that younger generations are more promiscuous than their predecessors. In fact, the biggest changes in youth sexual behavior in the United States occurred during the 1940s. Since 1948, the percentage of women who have had premarital sex by age 20 has remained about the same for all cohorts. Women in the younger cohort (between 1979 and 1984) were less likely to have had sex by age 20 than older cohorts.

Despite exaggerated headlines to the contrary, it appears hookups aren't a sign of the end of life as we know it. That doesn't mean they don't have some negative effects. For women, specifically, hookups don't mean that a double standard isn't still in place. We discussed the double standard in Chapter 5 as the cultural belief that certain behaviors are okay for one gender but not the other. Though both men and women engage in hookups, women are still more likely to be labeled "slutty" for engaging in too many hookups, while this is not a concern for men (Armstrong et al., 2018).

In addition, women lose out through hookup culture in the quality of the sex they have. Surveys reveal that for young college women, sex inside a relationship is simply better. Women orgasm more and report higher levels of sexual satisfaction with sex inside relationships than they do with hookup sex. These differences have to do with the type of sex happening inside relationships versus in hookups. While oral sex is more likely to be reciprocal in relationships, hookups often consist solely of oral sex for the male partner. Men also report more concern for the pleasure of their female partners in relationships than they do in hookups (Armstrong et al., 2018).

On the other hand, some research suggests that hookup culture—even with its emphasis on heteronormativity—may provide a space for women to explore same-sex desires. One aspect of hookup culture is the phenomenon of erotic interactions among women—women kissing

or touching other women at parties—usually for the benefit and arousal of men. Certainly, research has shown these behaviors happen partly as a way for young women to make themselves more attractive to men (Hamilton, 2007). But getting drunk and kissing or making out with another woman at a party also feels, for many women, like a "safe way to experiment" with same-sex sexuality (Rupp et al., 2014, p. 222). In one study, bisexual and queer women report that same-sex encounters within hookup culture were often their first entrant into an exploration of their own sexual identities. This is true even for some women who reported no previous same-sex attraction before their encounters.

Table 6.1 summarizes courtship and dating in different historical periods.

## Friends With Benefits

The final new pattern of intimacy between men and women in the United States is the "friends with benefits" phenomenon. Googling this phrase produces a proliferation of articles and Facebook groups, including quite a few advice columns that help their readers think through the advantages and disadvantages of this new type of relationship. One of the first studies conducted on friends with benefits, or the FWB phenomenon, was among Michigan State University students, and it indicated that 60% of the students reported having had at least one relationship that fit the criteria of friends with benefits (Carey, 2007).

**TABLE 6.1 ■ History of Courtship and Dating**

| Courtship System | Time Period | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Calling | 19th to early 20th century | Male suitors obtained permission from mothers to call on young women in their household under adult supervision; any financial exchange (e.g., gifts) was prohibited; control largely resided with mothers. |
| Rating-dating-mating complex | Early 20th century | Both girls and boys dated many different people, with the goal to increase their status; high status for a girl was to preserve her reputation by not engaging in sexual activity, while high status for a boy was to gain sexual experience. |
| Dating | 20th century | Boys and men asked girls and women out on an excursion (e.g., dinner or movie); financial obligation on boys and men to pay; control largely resides with boys and men to ask girls and women out. |
| Going steady | Post–World War II | Ideal is to stay with one person for a longer, committed relationship as practice for marriage; due to shifting demographics after WWII; some sexual activity permitted. |
| Hookups | Late 20th and early 21st century | Interaction focused on engaging in some sexual activity rather than establishing a relationship; generally spontaneous rather than planned; may be connected to shifting gender demographics on college campuses. |

**Friends with benefits** is generally defined as having sex in a nonromantic friendship. In the study at Michigan State, only one-tenth of the friends-with-benefits relationships went on to become actual romantic relationships. In another third of the relationships, the sex eventually ended while the friendship continued. One in four of the relationships broke off both the friendship and the sex, while the rest of the respondents continued with both the sex and the friendship. Women and men in this study seemed motivated to enter into these arrangements because they were perceived as a safer type of relationship, free of the commitment level assumed in a typical romantic relationship. In most other ways, the relationships truly resembled friendships more than any other type of relationship.

Assuming that hooking up and friends with benefits are, in fact, the rising new trends in sexuality and intimacy in places like the United States, what exactly do these behaviors say about our changing culture? Certainly, they reflect changing norms around both sexuality and marriage in the United States. Although it is true that most people in the United States will get married, the number of people who are not married recently surpassed the number of people who *are* married in the population as a whole. It is also true that people in the United States are putting off marriage until a later age, although we discuss these figures in historical perspective in Chapter 8.

If marriage is presumed to happen later in life, if at all, for young people in college, then it makes sense that courtship activities among these groups are no longer really about courtship. Neither hooking up nor friends with benefits seems to be an activity oriented toward the task of finding a life partner. This is especially true given the other piece of the puzzle: the increasing liberalization of sexual norms during the particular historical period, starting at the beginning of the 20th century, during which calling transformed into dating.

Sexual convergence means the norms around the sexual behavior of women specifically have changed in the last 100 years, and the prohibitions against sex before marriage have generally loosened—although some abstinence movements seek to reverse this trend. **Sexual convergence** is the trend for the norms and ideals of women's sexuality to become increasingly similar to the norms and ideals of men's sexuality. Though the double standard still exists, the sexual behaviors of women and men are becoming increasingly similar. Hooking up and friends with benefits are practices that seem to have few rules relative to the complicated and highly gendered systems of calling and dating. That these behaviors seem, at least for now, to have few gender implications may suggest a growing similarity in the sexual and romantic experiences of women and men.

What about love, though? Does romantic love have any place within hooking up and friends with benefits? The evidence so far suggests otherwise, but the research is still rather sparse and sometimes contradictory (Paul et al., 2000). Although anecdotal evidence suggests that friends with benefits is a practice that continues beyond college, it is unclear whether either of these patterns applies to many of the young people in the United States who do not attend college. With current research, it's still uncertain whether these trends apply to a great many colleges or just a few. Is hooking up more likely to occur at big campuses or small campuses? Does it happen at colleges and universities that are not primarily residential, that is, with large populations of students living on campus?

One of the most important correlates of hookup behavior researchers have uncovered is the consumption of alcohol, and this is especially true for hookups that include sexual intercourse (Paul et al., 2000). This suggests that hookups would be less prevalent on campuses with a social life centered around activities beyond drinking. Perhaps most importantly, there is little research on whether these trends apply outside college campuses at all, both for young people who are not in college and for older people, who also have romantic and sexual lives. Time will tell whether hookups and friends with benefits are here to stay, but it is also important to keep in mind, as we discussed previously, that many college students still have romantic relationships. And most people will eventually end up married. Perhaps, as that event is happening increasingly later and seems less permanent than it has in the past, hooking up and friends with benefits become easy ways to fill the time spent in between with minimal hassle.

## Romantic Love in Cross-Cultural Perspective

What do courtship and dating look like on a global scale? Romantic love is certainly an important cultural feature of societies outside Anglo-European society. But many of these traditions are, not surprisingly, different in the ways they depict romantic love. In the Christian religious traditions that currently dominate much of the United States, it is hard to imagine Jesus having a passionate love affair with one of the women in the Bible. In fact, much controversy has been raised by suggesting that such a thing ever happened. Romantic love, in this view, is largely incompatible with the spiritual world. But in Hindu traditions, romantic love can represent the highest forms of spiritual love, and love stories are an important part of religious teachings.

Many cultures have strong traditions, myths, and stories about romantic love. Scholars also argue that with the increasing influence of Anglo-European cultures through globalization, more and more cultures are beginning to follow and aspire to ideals of romantic love as they dominate in the United States. In countries like Saudi Arabia, strict rules enforce an almost complete separation of women and men, and only recently among some more liberal Saudis have a bride and groom been allowed to see each other or talk to each other before they are married (Slackman, 2008; Zoepf, 2008). Young people in Saudi Arabia generally support these strong religious strictures that make anything that vaguely resembles dating almost impossible.

But both young women and young men in these countries wonder about romantic love and how exactly it fits into their lives. Young girls debate whether it is appropriate under the strict Wahhabi sect of Islam enforced in Saudi Arabia to talk to boys on Facebook or even to have them as Facebook friends. They speculate on what to talk to their future husband about during their one or two opportunities to speak with him before the wedding. Saudi boys have the theme song from *Titanic* as their cell phone ring and describe themselves as very romantic. These same young men dangerously push the boundaries of acceptable behavior as it is defined between men and women by trying to get phone numbers from women they see in public. For a generation of young people who grew up watching Oprah and Dr. Phil as well as seeing American movies like *Pride and Prejudice*, it becomes difficult to reconcile their own experiences with courtship with those they see depicted in popular culture.

How do other cultures mix their own views of romantic love with the particular systems of courtship and marriage native to their own society? Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the concept of romantic love is not a new tradition that has been imported from Anglo-European societies. Notions of romantic love have existed in Igbo society, although interestingly, they were more likely to occur through institutionalized extramarital affairs. An old Igbo proverb notes that "sweetness is deepest among lovers," suggesting that romantic love is more likely to exist outside marriage than within. In his study of romance, courtship, and marriage among the Igbo, Daniel Jordan Smith (2001) noted that the important question for those researching romantic love in cross-cultural perspective is not whether such a thing exists but how exactly romantic love is integrated into the fabric of social life.

Among the Igbo, marriage selection in the past was based on more of a collectivistic orientation. In **individualistic** societies, the needs of the individual outweigh the needs of any collective. The needs of the collective are perceived as more important than individual needs in a **collectivistic** culture, and in these types of societies, marriage is less likely to be a matter of individual choice. Marriage in collectivistic societies is viewed less as a coming together of two individuals based on free choice and more as a strategic alliance that should provide some important benefits to larger groups, including families, larger kinship groups, tribes, or villages.

As we'll explore in Chapter 8, this particular view of marriage is much more common both historically and cross-culturally than the more individualistic approach that dominates Anglo-European societies today. Since World War II, individual choice in marriage has become increasingly common among the Igbo. In addition, the importance of conjugality in marriage has also increased. **Conjugality** is a term used to describe the personal relationship between husband and wife, so an increasing emphasis on conjugality means that marriage is increasingly being perceived as about this relationship—between husband and wife. What else would marriage be about, you might ask, as this seems to be the only thing in Anglo-European society? But in a collectivistic orientation, the personal relationship between husband and wife is secondary to the collective interests of larger groups. An emphasis on conjugality is thus part of the transition away from collectivistic orientations and toward a more individualistic view of marriage.

But the changes taking place within Igbo culture are not as simple as a straightforward transition from collectivistic to individualistic. While Igbo men and women increasingly choose their marriage partners and base these decisions primarily on romantic love and conjugality, they still do so within certain parameters set by the influence of older traditions. Smith (2001) told the story of Chinyere and Ike, two Igbo young people who met while Chinyere (an Igbo woman) was attending a teacher's college and Ike (an Igbo man) was a building contractor in the same town. Chinyere was educated as well as beautiful and chose Ike from among many potential suitors. Chinyere and Ike dated for 2 years, during which time they often went out for dinner and dancing, before deciding to marry. The couple went to social events together, where they were acknowledged as a couple, and started sleeping together before they married.

When the two agreed to get married, only then did they involve their families, in part to begin arranging the traditional Igbo marriage ceremony, the *igba nkwu*. Chinyere and Ike's

story differs a great deal from those told by Igbo men and women older than 60 years of age, for whom mate selection involved their mother or father pointing to someone and saying, "That will be your spouse" (Smith, 2001, p. 134). Older Igbo who married under this system had their difficulties; many told stories of women who ran away to avoid marriage or men who married the woman of their own choosing in defiance of their parents. These stories demonstrate that romantic love did happen under the old system of marriage—it just wasn't always perceived as something that happened within marriage.

Contemporary Igbo couples like Chinyere and Ike choose their own mates, but they do so within constraints. Traditional Igbo society dictates that marriages be between men and women from different villages as a way of fostering important alliances and connections among different groups of people. Thus, Igbo marriages were generally between a man and a woman from two different villages, but the two villages were generally close to each other and had long-standing ties between them. Marrying someone from a neighboring village helped to maintain peace between the two villages, created potential allies in the event of warfare with a third village, and facilitated networks of trade and other potentially profitable relationships (Smith, 2001).

With the increasing geographic mobility of young people like Chinyere and Ike in Igbo society and the growing prevalence of individual choice and romantic love in marriage, there is no longer any guarantee that marriages will occur between closely neighboring villages. Families and village members have practical reasons to encourage these alliances between geographically close villages. At a distance, it is more difficult for the woman's family to make sure the marriage is going well, and the couple's families will not become as familiar and involved in the lives of children from such a marriage. This lack of involvement means that the wife's family will not as easily be able to benefit from any resources the children of the marriage could eventually provide.

The family of the husband also feels potentially cut off from the newly formed family, as well as unable to appeal to their new relatives through marriage for support or assistance. Smith (2001) suggested that in Igboland, these boundaries of geography are stronger than those of ethnicity because it is generally more difficult for men and women to marry someone from a distant village than to marry someone from a different ethnic group.

This doesn't mean that people from distant villages don't fall in love and decide on their own to get married. But family still has a strong role to play in the final steps of the process of getting married because, eventually, couples talk to their families and need their cooperation to plan and organize their igba nwku, or marriage ceremony. When a woman and man from distant villages approach their families, their families often try to talk them out of the match, usually by relying on stereotypes about the people in the distant village. Often, the woman's family in these situations exerts its control by repeatedly putting off the delegates from the man's family when they come to negotiate bride wealth, or the amount of money that the husband's family will pay to the wife's family. Families sometimes use this tactic of delay until the man gives up and withdraws his suit or the woman herself tells her suitor she's no longer interested.

Although individual choice, romantic love, and conjugality are increasingly important among the Igbo, there are still real constraints on the power of romantic love. At first, this may

sound strange and foreign to those in cultures like the United States. But the idea of a man's or woman's family being upset that their grandchildren will end up living very far away from them isn't really that hard to translate across cultures. A family in the United States may not fight quite as hard to prevent the marriage, but there are other constraints placed on romantic love in Anglo-European cultures. All the rules we discussed in the section on friendship apply to whom we court and love as well. We generally can't fall in love with someone we never had the opportunity to meet, and in our highly segregated society, this means we're less likely to fall in love with someone who is different from us in terms of age, social class, race, or ethnicity. Romantic love, although we believe it transcends all boundaries, has real limits and barriers placed on it in all cultures.

## LOVE WITHOUT GENDER

Romance culture in the United States tells us that love overcomes all obstacles, but is that true? Can romantic love transcend gender itself? In her essay "Loving Outside Simple Lines," Sonya Bolus (2002/2017) recounts her experience of being in a relationship with a woman as her partner transitioned to becoming a man and how that affected Bolus's own identity. Before her partner's transition, Bolus saw herself as a femme woman in love with a butch woman. "I'm a femme who loves butches, who knows butches," she writes. "I understand your body. Why can't that be enough?" As her partner pursued top surgery to remove her breasts, Bolus was forced to examine the implications for her own sense of self. How can she be a femme lesbian if her partner becomes a man? Does her partner's transition make her straight? Bolus makes up her own word to describe her new identity—*transensual*—and takes comfort from the label as she did with the previous labels of femme and lesbian. For Bolus, her romantic love for her partner is strengthened by their transition.

Transitioning within an existing relationship presents just one potential challenge for transgender people trying to find love and companionship. Romantic and sexual encounters for transgender people, and especially trans women, can be deadly. Since 2013, more than 130 transgender and gender-expansive people have been killed in the United States, with those numbers climbing almost daily. Trans women of color are especially vulnerable, making up 4 out of 5 antitransgender homicides.

In a study of media coverage of violence against transgender people, Westbrook and Schilt (2013) discovered a common narrative. The researchers found most of these accounts (95%) involved violence by cis men against trans women. In a typical story, the two individuals are strangers or recent acquaintances. Either the cis man or the trans woman makes a sexual proposition, sometimes involving the exchange of money or other favors. The cis man discovers the "true" gender of the trans woman and responds with violence. The media describes the cis men as having been "tricked" in a narrative that assumes that genitalia are the same as gender. This narrative of deception doesn't exist when the victim is a trans woman who has had gender-confirming surgery. Ignoring gender identity altogether, these trans women are described over and over again with terms such as *secret, lied, tricked,*

*misled, avoid detection, posed as a woman, true gender, really a woman, true identity, double life, fooled, deceit, pretended, masquerade*, and *gender secret* (Westbrook & Schilt, 2013). In other words, the gender identity of trans women is ignored. A person with a penis cannot possibly be a true woman.

This narrative of having been deceived by the victim is so powerful that it persists even when evidence suggests that the cis man knew of the victim's transgender identity. William Palmer murdered Chanelle Pickett in 1995 and claimed that he didn't know Pickett was transgender until they were engaged in sex. But some news articles quoted friends of Pickett who suggested that Palmer was a regular at transgender hangouts and intentionally pursued trans women who hadn't had gender-confirming surgery. Despite this evidence to the contrary, both media coverage and the story told in Palmer's trial persisted with a narrative of deception. The jury found this story convincing enough to convict Palmer of only assault and battery rather than murder (Westbrook & Schilt, 2013).

In their research, Westbrook and Schilt (2013) discovered only one instance of violence against a trans man. Brandon Teena, a trans man whose story was made famous in the film *Boys Don't Cry*, was murdered not by any of his cis women partners when they discovered his "female identity." Instead, he was killed by cis men, enraged when they discovered Brandon had been dating and having sex with cis women. The overwhelming majority of perpetrators of violence against transgender people are cis men. In the case of cis men who murder trans women, the "discovery" of their male genitalia threatens the cis men's masculinity as well as their heterosexuality.

If trans women are not seen as women but as men, then a cis man having sex with a trans woman becomes homosexual under the "one-act rule of homosexuality." Like the one-drop rule for race (in which one drop of Black blood makes a person categorizable as Black), the one-act rule dictates that one same-gender sexual encounter makes you categorizable as homosexual. Because of the ways in which gender and sexuality are linked, many cis men who have sex with trans women believe it also calls their masculinity into question. Westbrook and Schilt suggest that this need to defend both the gender identity and the sexual identity of cis men is part of what explains these acts of violence.

Dating for transgender people is obviously complicated by these patterns of violence. In writing about her experiences dating as a trans woman, Janelle Villapando (2019) recounts one instance when a date claimed not to have seen her clear identification as transgender on the dating site where they hooked up. On their date, things progressed, and they were making out in the back seat of Villapando's car when she decided to make sure her date knew about her transgender identity. Her date jumped out of the car, slammed the door, spat on the ground, and walked away.

Understandably, Villapando's first concern in the moment was for her own safety. It was only after that she could reflect on what the date revealed about how much simpler dating is for cis women. In general, Villapando finds that the cis men she dates fall into three categories: guys who see her as a fetish; guys who can't handle that she's trans; and guys, like the one from the back of the car, who seem to ignore or not pay attention to Villapando's open status as transgender. In the face of these unsatisfactory options, Villapando remains single and cautious. Jacob

Tobia (2019) (who uses the pronouns they/them), transgender activist, actor, and writer, discusses the difficulty of finding partners in their memoir, *Sissy*. Neither gay cis men nor straight cis men seem interested in Tobia. They find bisexual or pansexual men to be the group most likely to be okay dating them.

Recent research on the datability of transgender people confirms Tobia's and Villapando's experiences. A sample of 958 participants ages 18 to 81 (all but 7 of whom were cisgender) were asked to indicate which genders they would consider dating (Blair & Hoskin, 2018; Vrangalova, 2018). The options were cis man, cis woman, trans man, trans woman, or genderqueer. Participants could select as many genders as they wanted; only 12% picked trans man or trans woman. Those more likely to be okay dating trans men or trans women tended to be somewhat older, were more likely to hold a college degree, and were less religious than those who wouldn't date a trans man or trans woman. Heterosexuals were less likely to be okay dating a transgender person; 1.8% of straight women and 3.3% of straight men chose a transgender person. Among gay men, 11.5% were willing to date a transgender person, while 29% of lesbians were trans-inclusive in their dating preferences. Confirming Tobia's experiences, those lumped into the category of bisexual/queer/nonbinary were the most likely to see transgender people as potential dates, but even among this group, 48% did not select either trans man or trans woman. The research obviously reveals the widespread cissexism that exists in society, where transgender people are not seen as potential romantic and sexual partners.

Though the researchers assumed that people would be most likely to be okay dating transgender people whose gender identity lines up with their stated sexual preferences, this isn't what they found. For example, 50% of straight women and 28% of gay men who were trans-inclusive in their dating preferences selected trans women as the category they would date. Neither straight women nor gay men would be expected to be attracted to women. The same held true for straight men and lesbian women; 50% of straight men and 69% of lesbians said they'd consider dating a trans man. These findings suggest that participants gave preference to the biological gender of trans men and trans women when they thought about them as potential dates. That is, straight men, whom we'd expect to be attracted to women, may perceive trans men's "true" identity as women.

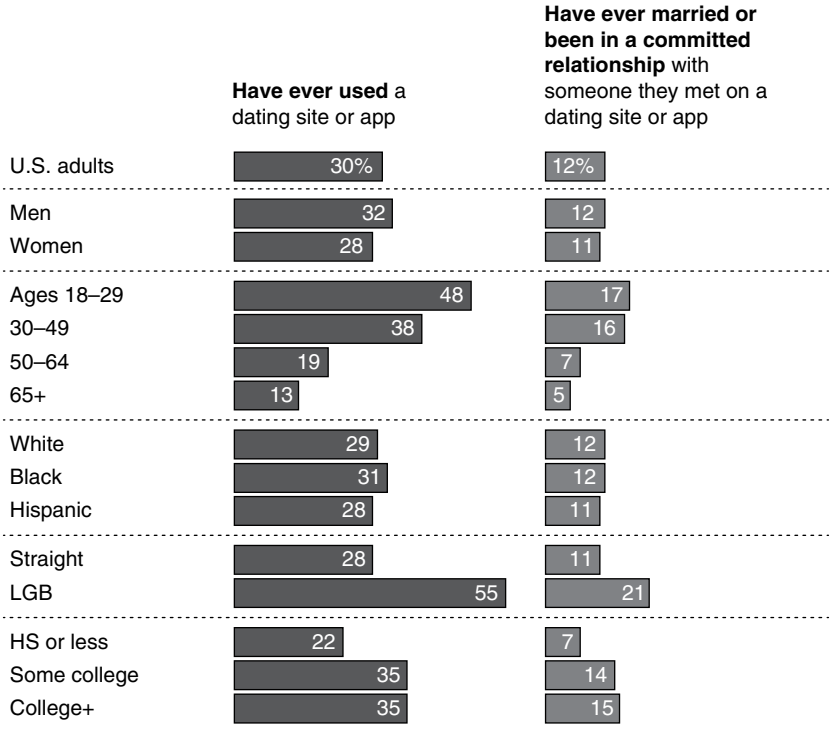
Finally, the research reveals specific prejudices against trans women as opposed to trans men. Among trans-inclusive bisexual/queer/nonbinary participants, 28% said they would date a trans man and not a trans woman. For trans-inclusive lesbians, 38% said they would date a trans man and not a trans woman. It's unclear exactly why trans men are perceived as more datable than trans women, but the research makes clear the difficulty for dating among transgender and nonbinary people. Romantic relationships are a key source of social support for adults, and that finding those relationships is more difficult for transgender people is yet another factor putting them more at risk.

Figure 6.3 demonstrates trends related to sexual identity, gender, and age in the use of online dating apps.

**FIGURE 6.3 ■ Key Demographics Related to Online Dating, 2019**

**As of 2019, younger Americans and those who are lesbian, gay or bisexual were more likely to date or to find a partner through online platforms**

*% saying they …*


Have ever used a dating site or app
Have ever married or been in a committed relationship with someone they met on a dating site or app
U.S. adults 30% 12%
Men 32 12
Women 28 11
Ages 18–29 48 17
30–49 38 16
50–64 19 7
65+ 13 5
White 29 12
Black 31 12
Hispanic 28 11
Straight 28 11
LGB 55 21
HS or less 22 7
Some college 35 14
College+ 35 15

*Source:* Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 16–28, 2019. *The virtues and downsides to online dating.* Pew Research Center.

*Note:* White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. LGB indicates those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

## SUMMING UP

In the end, it's safe to say that almost all cultures have some basic idea of something like what we call love and intimacy. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine what a rewarding human life would look like without these important experiences. It's also safe to say that the particular ways in which different cultures define exactly what constitutes love and intimacy vary a great deal. The level of intimacy expected among a married couple in the United States may seem grossly inappropriate for married couples in cultures where marriage is much more of a political and economic arrangement than an emotional one.

In the United States, many people could probably come up with a kind of hierarchy of love and intimacy, ordering the types of love that are most and least important to their lives. Love for family might be most important or closely tied with the romantic love one feels for a partner. Next might be the love one experiences for friends or for extended family such as aunts and grandparents. This hierarchy would probably roughly correspond with levels of intimacy as well. But we have learned that this particular hierarchy would probably be unique to the culture of the United States and not necessarily shared by those in other parts of the world. In traditional Indian society, the relationship between a mother and a son would probably have much greater importance than the relationship between a husband and a wife (Kanin, 1970). Among the Bangwa in Cameroon, male friends perform funeral rites, and this friendship is trusted above the family, where relatives are perceived as scheming and self-interested in ways that friends are not (Brain, 1976). The ways in which a society provides for the basic human needs of love and intimacy vary a great deal.

These patterns of love and intimacy are deeply influenced by each culture's notions of gender. Friendship, for most of its history, was assumed to be a gender-segregated phenomenon, a relationship that made sense only between two women or two men, and this is still true in many parts of the world. This fact powerfully demonstrates for us the ways in which gender affects our everyday lives. Although the particular paths that lead individuals into institutions like marriage vary globally, some including love and some not, in all of these paths, gender plays an important role. Although we might like to think of love as something untouched by the influences of culture or as something that exists in a realm beyond gender or class or race, this is simply not the case. As research about transgender dating preferences demonstrates, our notions of who is and who isn't datable are deeply gendered.

## BIG QUESTIONS

- "Opposites attract" is a common saying, but how does it apply to romantic love? Is it true? What are its implications for same-sex relationships? Does the phrase apply to friendships as well? How does the idea of opposites attracting reinforce ideas about the gender binary?
- In Chapter 5, we discussed the history of Anglo-European categories of sexuality and the emergence of the concepts of homosexuality and heterosexuality. How do this history and these concepts connect to our discussion in this chapter of the history of friendship in Anglo-European society? How are the two histories connected? What does this reveal about the connections among sex category, gender, sexuality, and relationships in general?
- From the perspective of many Anglo-European societies, it seems wrong not to be able to choose your own romantic partner or friends. Is it fair to judge these practices as wrong or unjust? If you take the perspective of collectivistic cultures, in which friends and romantic partners may be chosen for you, can you see some possible advantages of this system?
- Each era in the history of courtship both shaped gender beliefs and was shaped by the gender beliefs of the time. What do the current practices of hooking up and friends with benefits reveal about our gender beliefs? How are they shaping the way we think about gender today and the way we will think about it in the future?

- How much of our attraction, romantic or sexual, is based on gender? What would a world of courtship and dating look like if gender didn't exist? How would transgender and gender-expansive people fit into this system?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. Much of the research on the gender of friendships is contradictory. Try testing out some of the findings with your own survey or interviews on gender and friendship. Keep in mind Walker's (1994) findings about the differences between global questions about friendship and questions about behaviors within one specific friendship. What do your findings seem to suggest about gender and friendship? Are there important differences based on factors besides gender, such as age, social class, or race?
2. Much of Beth Bailey's (1988) history of courtship in the United States is drawn from magazines and advice books. Do your own content analysis of popular magazines or dating advice books. What norms for courtship do they seem to prescribe? Are they different for women and men? What do these sources tell you about the direction courtship is going and the changes taking place?
3. What makes people attracted to each other, as we discussed in this chapter, is a difficult subject to study. Investigate some aspect of attractiveness for yourself. You might set up an experiment in which you show subjects pictures of different types of people and ask them which they find attractive. Or you might ask people to make a list of all the people they've been in some kind of relationship with (friendship, romantic, or sexual) and ask them to describe what was attractive about those people. Or you might look at descriptions on online dating sites like Match.com or HotorNot.com.
4. Dating websites like Match.com and eHarmony.com are increasingly popular ways of meeting people around the world. Do an Internet investigation of different kinds of dating sites and how they differ. For example, you might explore Jdate.com, a dating site for Jewish people; IndianDating.com for people from India; or MuslimFriends.com for people of the Islamic faith. How many kinds of dating sites can you find, and how do they differ in their representations of attractiveness, romance, dating, and gender?
5. Investigate age and generational differences in dating and courtship experiences. Ask people of different ages what dating or courtship looked like when they were young. Did they use dating apps? What did a "date" look like? What expectations did they have? What do they think about the courtship of current young people?
6. Conduct your own survey or interviews about transgender dating preferences. Ask people you know if they would consider dating someone who is transgender or gender expansive. How do your findings line up with the research discussed in this chapter? What explanations do people give for which particular categories—trans man, trans woman, or genderqueer—they'd be willing to date?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**Qutie**

Queer- and LGBTQ-inclusive dating app.

https://qutieapp.com

**HER**

Dating app for queer, lesbian, and bisexual women.

https://weareher.com

**Prom Resource Kit from GLAAD**

Advice on how to make proms more inclusive as well as advice for LGBTQ teenagers on negotiating formal dances.

www.glaad.org/publications/promkit

**Trevor Space**

Social networking site for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth.

www.trevorspace.org

## KEY TERMS

Calling
Collectivistic
Conjugality
Face-to-face
Families of choice
Fictive kin
Friends with benefits
Friendship
Going steady
Hookups
Implicit racial bias
Individualistic
Kin
Moral panic
Rating-dating-mating complex
Residential segregation
Romantic love
Sexual convergence
Side-by-side
Sociability
Social segregation

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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# 7 HOW DOES GENDER MATTER FOR HOW WE THINK ABOUT OUR BODIES?

## The Gender of Bodies and Health

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **7.1** Explain the mind-body dualism as it relates to the exploration of gender.
- **7.2** Summarize how ideals of beauty uphold gender inequality.
- **7.3** List some of the negative effects masculinity can have on health.
- **7.4** Describe some reasons that females throw differently than males.

What does it feel like to have a body? What would you change about your body if you could? How do you think gender affects the particular way you feel in your body? Is there a gender dimension to this division between the body and the mind or between the body and the soul?

Who's supposed to feel closer to their bodies? Nonbinary people? Feminine people? Masculine people? Who's supposed to feel more comfortable in their bodies? Who seems to take better care of their bodies, and who seems unafraid, by and large, to put their bodies at risk? How do you know the difference between a "good" body and a "bad" body or between a healthy body and an ill body? How is gender a part of how we make those distinctions? How do those dangers and the feelings we have about our bodies intersect with all the other identities we occupy?

Does gender play a part in who gets to say what happens to bodies, and how do other identities impact the amount of power we have over our own bodies? And finally, is there even such a thing as a body, or can we make the argument that the body itself is largely socially constructed, and how weird would it be to tell you that the very flesh and blood you occupy is a social construction?

These are some of the questions we ask in this chapter, which explores the gender of the body. As you can see through these questions, there's a lot to explore in relation to gender and the body. We've already begun to realize the ways in which bodies are important to gender. If you think about many of the controversial issues we've already touched on, bodies are often the terrain where these battles take place. In the case of intersex individuals, their bodies serve as the battleground for debates about what sex and gender are. What aspect of one's body makes one a man, and what aspect of one's body makes one a woman? Do our bodies have anything

to do with that at all? Sexuality necessarily involves the body, as do the considerations of physical attractiveness that we touched on in relation to dating and love. Issues related to the body are important throughout this book, and almost every topic related to gender can be explored through a focus on the body. In this chapter, we explore several specific topics that bring our bodies into focus while acknowledging that bodies are important throughout our discussion of gender.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF BODIES

The frequent connection between gender and bodies has to do with the history of bodies and, specifically, with how that history plays out in many parts of the developed world, where specific ways of thinking about the body have dominated. Many scholars have identified the mind–body dualism as one of the ideas most fundamental to Western thought, perhaps the first of many dualisms that form the basic structure of Anglo-European ways of thinking. The **mind–body dualism** is a belief in a split between the physical body and the nonmaterial entity we call mind (or spirit, soul, thought, etc.), where the mind is perceived as superior in many ways to the inferior body.

This mind–body dualism is expressed in sayings like "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." In this simple formulation, which is repeated in many shapes throughout Western cultures and dates back to Plato and Aristotle, the spirit represents the higher selves to which we aspire; the body is the force that prevents us, through its weakness, from achieving those higher goals. The mind–body dualism is a very old tension in Anglo-European cultures, one that is still being debated as neuroscientists try to locate many of the functions of the mind in the physical stuff of our brains—while other scientists argue that even the most complicated technologies for looking into the brain will never allow us to see the nonmaterial workings of the thing called "mind."

This dualism might be interesting enough in and of itself, and it has certainly generated libraries worth of scholarship and debate. It is interesting to our specific examination of gender because this fundamental dualism has its own gender dynamic. The mind is associated with masculinity; it is rational, aspires to the best efforts of the self, is closer to God, and is working toward ultimate self-realization (Bordo, 2003). The body is feminine and is the heavy drag on all the higher aspirations of the mind. It's difficult to say whether the male–female dualism came before the mind–body dualism or whether the gender aspect of the mind–body dualism was laid atop preexisting notions about gender differences.

Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) speculated that the gendered dynamic of the mind–body dualism can be traced to women's primary responsibility for taking care of human bodies as infants. Regardless of its genesis, the distinctly gendered nature of the mind–body dualism means that the negativity associated with the body is also associated with women and femininity. Like the body, women came to represent "distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death" (Bordo, 2003, p. 5). This is, needless to say, a lot of baggage to be located in the body.

The mind–body dualism positions women as more closely associated with their bodies than are men. Given all the negative associations of the body we just listed, this connection between women and their bodies raised important questions about the nature of bodies for feminists of the second wave in the global North. What are the effects of women's strong association with their bodies? What does it mean, exactly, to position women further away from the mind and closer to the physical realm of the body? Certainly, important connections to sexuality emerge. Some societies view women as hypersexual beings, as temptresses whose bodies are made to lead men away from the path of spiritual or intellectual strivings. The Adam and Eve story in the Christian Bible, in most interpretations, is a classic example of this dynamic. Eve, after being led astray by Satan in the form of the serpent, tempts Adam with knowledge in the form of an apple from the Tree of Knowledge and, thus, in many traditions, is blamed for humanity's fall from grace. Eve's sexuality literally gets humanity thrown out of the Garden of Eden and, therefore, permanently removed from the presence of God. In what other ways does the mind–body dualism affect both men and women in relation to their bodies?

One way in which gender and bodies intersect is body image, which has generally been something women are more concerned about than men. **Body image**, as we use the term here, involves the perception and evaluation of one's own bodily appearance. What does my body look like, and how do I feel about what my body looks like? Although the mind–body distinction positions the body as the less important part of the dualism, body image has been demonstrated to be connected to self-esteem and emotional stability, suggesting the ways in which our bodies can have important implications for the state of our minds (Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

The importance of our bodies to how we think and feel about ourselves is nothing new, and it is certainly nothing unique to Western cultures. All over the world, bodies reflect a person's status in his society and are used to project important identities. Among the Tiv of Nigeria, beauty is achieved among both women and men through scarification, or creating complex designs on the body through cutting it to create permanent scars (Burton, 2001). In the United States, we have surgery and invest in beauty products that promise to hide or remove the tiniest scars or imperfections on our bodies. Among the Tiv, these scars tell complicated stories about gender and the complex ways in which a particular Tiv individual fits into his or her patrilineal (descent through the male line) system of family and inheritance. On a Tiv woman's abdomen, straight lines and concentric circles represent the history of her lineage and the way it will continue to grow (Burton, 2001).

Among the Tiv, scarification on a body tells about gender, age (many scars are added to women only after puberty), and how that person fits into the historical and present social structure of Tiv society. What does the absence of any scars or imperfections on a person in the United States tell us? A face free of scars in a place like the United States is probably a good sign of social class because the surgeries and products necessary to remove or reduce scars can be expensive. In addition, people in higher classes generally have jobs and lives that are healthier and less dangerous, therefore reducing the chances that they will pick up scars and imperfections on their faces in the first place. Women are also more likely to be concerned about scars and blemishes on their faces than are men, because being "rugged" (in moderation) is considered a sign of masculinity. Scars in the United States and scars among the Tiv tell us very different things, but in both places, they demonstrate how the body serves as an important marker of our social status.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*What are examples in your own culture of the ways in which a person's status (not just gender, but statuses such as race, social class, ethnicity, age, nationality, or religious background) is marked on their bodies? How much can you tell about a person by looking at his or her body?*

What about the person in the United States who, for whatever reason, cannot avoid having scars? In a society that promotes perfection in our faces and our bodies, the inability to live up to those standards necessarily affects the way an individual thinks about himself or herself. Take the example of breast cancer survivor Paulette Leaphart. Leaphart had a double mastectomy, and in 2016, she decided to walk 1,000 miles topless to demonstrate to the world that there's nothing shameful about her scars (Tandy, 2016). Immediately following her surgery, Leaphart had fallen into a deep depression and grown reclusive, unable to confront her transformed body. At a trip to the beach, she found the courage to take her shirt off and have her daughters take pictures of her topless. When she posted the pictures to Facebook, the response was overwhelming. Leaphart's walk will become a documentary, bringing awareness to the stories of other women who've had mastectomies.

Leaphart's story demonstrates the deeply social aspect of how we understand the connection among our bodies, our self-esteem, and our emotions. Society tells us that a woman without breasts is ugly and abnormal, as well as that scars should be hidden rather than proudly displayed. This synergy between bodies and our image of ourselves has always been true historically and across a wide range of cultures.

But when feminists first began their examination of the body in relation to gender, they began to argue that the impacts of the social norms about the body were much greater on women than they were on men. Perhaps as a result of the gendered nature of the mind–body dualism, feminists argue that the body is, in fact, one of the main methods used for controlling women and maintaining male power. This does not mean that gender norms don't also impact men and their bodies, as we will explore later. Feminists are not the only group interested in unpacking many of the dominant cultural ideas about bodies, but we start with a feminist perspective and then explore other voices on body issues.

## THE BEAUTY MYTH

One of the main ways feminists argue that the body is used to maintain the power imbalance between women and men is through ideals of beauty. This concern with how beauty ideals affect women dates back to some of the first writings by women on the question of gender inequality. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft addressed the important role of beauty in women's subordination in her famous essay, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." Echoing later feminist scholars, Wollstonecraft wrote the following:

> Genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection . . . women are everywhere in this deplorable state. . . . Taught from their infancy that beauty is a woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison. (1792/1988, p. 82)

In 1914, one of the rights listed on the agenda of the first Feminist Mass Meeting in the United States was "the right to ignore fashion." One of the first public demonstrations during the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States was a protest of the Miss America pageant, in part because of the ways in which the institution of beauty pageants enforces certain beauty ideals on women (Bordo, 2003). The concern with beauty as a weapon used against women is nothing new to feminist social movements or scholarship.

A great deal of scholarship and a number of personal essays have explored the myriad ways beauty impacts women's lives. Naomi Wolf's (1991) book, *The Beauty Myth*, catalogs in great detail the ways in which cultural ideals of beauty create an unrealistic standard impossible for any real woman to achieve. The **beauty myth**, according to Wolf, is the belief in a quality called beauty that is real and universal and that women, as a result of biological, sexual, and evolutionary factors, should want to embody, while men should desire the women who embody that ideal of beauty. The important idea Wolf sets out to demonstrate in her book is that all of these ideas are part of a myth and are, therefore, not at all *actually* true. There is no universal and real measure of what beauty is because different cultures and historical time periods have different and often contradictory ideas about what makes someone beautiful.

In addition, there is no biological reason why women pursue beauty ideals; rather, as Wollstonecraft (1792/1988) and other feminists have repeatedly argued, women pursue beauty because culture strongly reinforces and rewards this pursuit. The beauty myth is not true, but its existence is a powerful force in keeping women focused on the pursuit of beauty and in providing both women and men with a way to judge and limit women by their physical appearance. Beauty, Wolf (1991) contended, is politically and economically determined, and the beauty myth serves as the "last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact" (p. 12). This has been especially true, Wolf argued, since the second wave of the feminist movement, when the beauty myth became even more powerful as a kind of backlash against women's gains in power and equality with men.

## Beauty and Gender Inequality

How exactly does the beauty myth become so important to upholding gender inequality? One way the beauty myth contributes to male dominance is by channeling much of women's energies toward the pursuit of beauty. When women fail to achieve the goals set up by the beauty myth, which they inevitably will (because there is no such thing as real, objective, and universal beauty), it takes a psychic and emotional toll on women everywhere. Most research demonstrates that women are more dissatisfied on the whole with their bodies than are men (Ambwani & Strauss, 2007; Cash & Henry, 1995; Garner, 1997; Jackson & Lernay, 2018; Muth & Cash, 1997) and that rates of dissatisfaction with bodies among both men and women are increasing over time (Feingold & Mazzella, 1998; Jefferson & Stake, 2009). In 1985, 30%

of women in the United States said they were unhappy with their overall appearance, while by 1993 the figure had increased to 48%, or nearly 1 in 2 (Cash & Henry, 1995). In 2018, 83% of women reported being dissatisfied with how their bodies look, compared to 74% of men (Jackson & Lernay, 2018). Recently, one survey revealed that 89% of American women are unhappy with their weight, and 39% say worrying about the scale or their eating interferes with their happiness (Schultz, 2015).

Why do women seem to be becoming even less satisfied with the appearance of their bodies? Consistent with Wolf's (1991) concept of the beauty myth, the ideals about what exactly a perfect woman's body looks like are always changing. In just the past century, the ideal female body type in the United States has gone from the cinched-waist ideal of the 1900s to the flat-chested, straight-bodied flapper of the 1920s to the full-chested, hourglass figure of the 1950s to the skinny yet large-breasted supermodels of today's fashion industry (Shields & Heinecken, 2002). The body type most commonly depicted in today's popular culture is one attainable to roughly 4% of the female population—as these models are on average 9% taller and 16% thinner than the average woman (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2000; Zones, 2005). No amount of dieting or exercise will make that body type attainable for the other 96% of the female population, despite the fact that images of women with this body type are those with which both men and women are bombarded daily. Although more than half of *Vogue*'s readers wear a size 14 or larger, most of the images in the magazine are of models who are a size 6 or smaller (Zones, 2005).

Even with the new body positivity movement and its influence on fashion, a preference still exists for undersized models. The **body positivity movement** advocates for the acceptance of all bodies, regardless of size, shape, skin tone, gender, or physical abilities. The movement is based on the belief that everyone deserves to have a positive body image, regardless of how well they do or don't fit into cultural standards like the beauty myth. In response to this movement, some clothing lines have begun including "plus" models in their advertising. But researcher Amanda M. Czerniawski found in her research working as a plus-size model that the definition of "plus-size" is still very limited. Though plus-sized clothing lines carry sizes from 14 to 24, most models are size 16 or below. Modeling agencies don't represent models of size 18 or above because there simply isn't enough work for them (Czerniawski, 2016).

In fact, many times, models of a smaller size are used for plus-sized clothes and then filled out with padding. This is because advertisers want a curvy body with a thin face. Many ads for "plus-sized" clothing lines are being modeled by women who might be a size 10 or 12. The padding strategically accentuates the breasts, butt, and thighs while maintaining a thinner waist and face. The ideal of the hour-glass figure is preserved, and actual plus-sized models are passed over for their thinner counterparts. This means that the images of supposedly "plus-size" people we see in advertising are still far from the reality of what women's bodies truly look like.

The media and the images of beauty displayed in popular culture are part of the reason women are becoming increasingly less satisfied with their bodies. When the ideal body type held up for women is so far outside the range of normal women's bodies, the possibility of ever attaining that ideal becomes further and further out of reach for most women. When we consider the ways in which beauty is not just highly gendered but also racialized, classed, and sexualized, achieving beauty becomes forever out of reach for most women in the United States, as

well as around the world. Just as images of beauty have changed over time and vary across cultures, there has never been one dominant ideal of beauty in the United States. Dominant ideals of beauty always compete with those that exist in specific racial, ethnic, and class subcultures.

Yet although there may be different ways of thinking about beauty in different racial, ethnic, and national groups, these localized beauty ideals always compete with the dominant ideals legitimated through popular culture. In this dominant ideal, to be beautiful as a woman, you must also be white (or perhaps light-skinned at the very least), able-bodied, young, and thin (Zones, 2005). Women who exist in any way outside these norms can never conform to this ideal, although there are myriad beauty products and advertisers who might attempt to convince them that they can. Women with disabilities are rarely ever held up in popular culture as images of beauty, and the experiences of many women with disabilities indicate that with visible disabilities, the signs of disability often overwhelm any other impression individuals might have of a disabled person. One college student in a survey said, "I think the visual impact of a person sitting in a chair with wheels on it is so great as to render all other impressions, such as dress or grooming, virtually insignificant" (Kaiser et al., 1985).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 7.1

### FAIR AND LOVELY—SKIN COLOR AND BEAUTY

What color is beautiful skin? For much of Anglo-European history, women aspired to have skin as pale as possible. Freckles, sunspots, a tan, or any sign of exposure to the sun was to be avoided at all costs. Think of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* being cautioned to wear a hat and not expose her bosom to the afternoon sun. In the United States, being "tan" for white people became fashionable in the 1960s. Today, people with fair skin in the United States spend millions of dollars on tanning beds and other products to make their skin look darker. Ten percent of the U.S. population uses some kind of indoor tanning every year (Indoor Tanning Association, 2005). Despite the dangers posed by indoor and outdoor tanning, for many people in Anglo-European societies, darker skin (on white people) is beautiful.

In India, women, and more recently men, spend millions of dollars to become lighter-skinned. Products sold to lighten the skin make up 60% of skin care sales in India, bringing in $140 million a year for the maker of the most popular brand, Fair and Lovely (Leistikow, 2003). Recently, the same company introduced a skin lightener cream targeted to men, Fair and Handsome. In one commercial for Fair and Lovely, two women sit in a bedroom, having an intimate conversation. The lighter-skinned woman has a boyfriend and is happy, while the darker-skinned woman lacks a boyfriend and is not. The solution? Buy some Fair and Lovely to wash away the dark skin that's keeping the men from flocking. In another ad, a woman lands a well-paying job as a flight attendant to support her father after using the skin-lightening cream. In a Fair and Handsome commercial, a man becomes a successful movie star, complete with a bevy of beautiful women, only after he uses the skin-lightening cream. On a popular Indian talk show, a movie director suggests that darker-skinned women are the women you take to a hotel, while the lighter-skinned women are the ones you

take home to your mother. This suggests that in places like India, skin color is believed to be a signal not just of beauty but also of sexual availability.

How might you account for the variations in skin color and attractiveness across historical periods and cultures? How does this fit with the idea of the beauty myth? How are other ways of defining beauty also connected to assumptions about sexuality and to other identities like race and ethnicity?

## Exporting the Beauty Myth

Regarding body type and the beauty myth, the ideal in the United States of thinness as the ultimate goal for all women has begun to spread globally. As it does, it displaces beauty norms in many cultures that venerate and view as desirable a body type that would now probably be considered overweight by U.S. standards. In 2001, a Nigerian woman won the Miss World title for the first time after the producer for the local Nigerian beauty pageant instructed his judges to pick a Nigerian representative to the Miss World pageant based on international, rather than local, standards of beauty. The difference? The ideal body shape for women for many Nigerians is "Coca-Cola bottle voluptuousness." That year's Nigerian winner of the Miss World pageant was 6 feet tall and skinny, in line with American beauty standards.

Nigerians, especially those older than age 40, did not find their pageant winner particularly attractive. This is a country in which festivals are held to celebrate large women, and in the Niger region, women eat livestock feed or vitamins to bulk up rather than slim down. Among certain groups in Nigeria, brides are sent to fattening farms before their weddings, where caretakers feed them huge amounts of food until the wedding, when the big brides are let out and paraded in the village square. But in the year since their Miss World pageant victory, and with the increasingly widespread reach of Western media images, ideals of feminine beauty have begun to shift in Nigeria. Thin girls like the Miss World winner are called *lepa*, a Yoruba word that means "thin" but has just recently been applied to people. Songs and movies are being made about lepa girls, and among many of the younger generation in Nigeria, thin is in and voluptuousness is out (Onishi, 2002).

A similar transition seems to be taking place in Brazil, where the ideal female body type of the past was guitar-shaped, which meant she had an ample waist, hips, and bottom. Brazilian international supermodel Gisele Bundchen is tall, thin, and busty—far from guitar-shaped. Young Brazilian girls used to play with Susi, a doll whose body reflected Brazilian norms. Susi was darker-skinned than Barbie, her counterpart in the United States, as well as fleshier in the hips, waist, and bottom. In the 1970s, Barbie arrived in Brazil, and by the mid-1980s, production of the Susi doll had ended, leaving Brazilian girls with the blond and skinny Barbie as a model of beauty.

This shift in cultural norms is not without consequences; the percentage of the Brazilian population taking appetite suppressant pills nearly doubled between 2001 and 2005. Brazilians recently became concerned about eating disorders; in 2007, six young women died of anorexia in quick succession, among them a 21-year-old model (Rohter, 2007). In less urban areas of Brazil, the norms favoring fleshy women continue to be relatively strong, and researchers have demonstrated that Brazilian men, by and large, still prefer women who are *popozuda*, or fleshy in the rear.

The problems surfacing in places like Brazil in the form of eating disorders and the use of diet pills are not new to women in the United States. Cultural norms that venerate thinness as the ideal body type are important contributors to the prevalence of a wide range of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia in the United States. Both anorexia and bulimia affect women disproportionately over men. Men who do suffer from anorexia or bulimia tend to be involved in activities that have rigid weight requirements, such as dancing, modeling, and wrestling (Bordo, 2003).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 7.2

### BODY HAIR AND BEING TRANSGENDER

One of the biggest gender cues used by people to perform gender attribution, or sorting everyone into categories of women and men, is the presence or absence of a beard. We generally believe that people with beards are men and people without beards are women, even though this isn't actually the case. Many cis men can't grow beards, and many cis women can. In fact, the presence or absence of body hair on women and men isn't a biological marker of gender at all but a social one. We believe women should have little to no body hair while men should have more body hair. This results in a whole industry of hair removal products for women, but these gender norms also affect transgender people. Transgender activist, artist, fashion designer, and writer Alok Vaid-Menon (who uses the pronouns they/them) has done a lot of thinking about body hair. When Vaid-Menon told their family they were trans, one of their initial reactions was, "But you're so hairy! It's going to be so difficult to remove all your hair to be a woman, you should just give up" (Vaid-Menon, 2019). Like many people, Vaid-Menon's family assumed that to be a woman, you must be mostly hairless. When Vaid-Menon began attending support groups for other transgender people, they were told, "If you want to be taken seriously as a trans person then you need to remove your body hair and start a medical transition." This policing of gender norms reinforced what their family had already told them—it's impossible to be both feminine and hairy. Growing up in an Indian family in Texas, Vaid-Menon learned from a young age that they were supposed to hate their body hair. They watched their sister's body hair being patrolled, with aunties and others giving her advice about waxing and threading for eyebrows. As a trans person, the consequences for not removing body hair can be serious. Vaid-Menon has had to endure harassment in the street and daily trolling on social media. The stress and anxiety of this constant harassment takes its toll, as they experience chronic pain. Vaid-Menon points to the ways the beauty industry has taught us to hate our body hair, but they take comfort from it. "I love to touch my body hair, it's comforting," Vaid-Menon explains. "Life would be so much easier if I removed my body hair. But why should I shave to make people feel more comfortable?" What would it mean if body hair were not seen as gendered?

## Eyelids and Empowerment: Race and the Beauty Myth

Cosmetic surgery is considered to be a more extreme step in the alteration of one's body, an invasive procedure that is qualitatively different from exercising, dieting, hair styling, using makeup, or other techniques aimed at body alteration. Those who choose to have cosmetic

surgery appear to many observers to have placed so much importance on their physical appearance as to put their very lives at risk by undergoing surgery (Gimlin, 2002).

Nonetheless, much of the stigma surrounding cosmetic surgery will probably continue to fade thanks to the increasing numbers of women and men who elect to have cosmetic surgery. Plastic surgeons performed more than 17.7 million aesthetic procedures in 2018, nearly 277,000 more than in the previous year. The most common cosmetic surgery procedure is breast augmentation, with surgeons performing 13,000 more of these surgeries in 2018 compared to 2017 (Hilton, 2019). Liposuction is the second-most-common cosmetic surgery, and thus it's not surprising that fully 92% of cosmetic surgery operations are performed on women (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2018).

Although the practice of cosmetic surgery has certainly improved over time so that many procedures can be done on an outpatient basis, without the client ever having to spend the night in a hospital, any surgical procedure carries with it a set of risks. Cosmetic surgery is no exception. Liposuction can cause pain, numbness, bruising, and discoloration, sometimes for up to 6 months after the operation. Face-lifts can leave the recipient's face permanently numb. More serious potential complications from cosmetic surgery include fat embolisms, blood clots, fluid depletion, and potentially death. Breast augmentation carries with it a 30% to 50% risk of serious side effects, including loss of feeling in the breasts, painful swelling or congestion of the breasts, and hardening of the breasts that make lying down or lifting the arms painful and difficult. Possibly the worse outcome from breast augmentation is encapsulation, in which the body reacts to the breast implants as foreign material and forms a capsule of fibrous tissue around the implants. In these cases, doctors must either massage the coverings away manually or remove the implants altogether; either process can be extremely painful to the patient (Gimlin, 2002). Those who argue that cosmetic surgery is qualitatively different from frequent dieting or obsessive exercising point to these facts about the dangers of cosmetic surgery.

A fact that might be surprising to many people is the third-most-popular cosmetic surgery operation in the United States: blepharoplasty. Blepharoplasty is eyelid surgery, and this procedure was performed on 206,000 patients in 2018, 85% of them women (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2018). What exactly is eyelid surgery, and why is there such a high demand for this type of surgery? The procedure is marketed by plastic surgeons as reversing signs of aging and fatigue by helping patients get rid of the "droopy eyelid" look and the appearance of bags under the eyes. In this sense, any woman or man seeking to erase the signs of aging might elect to have this procedure, as part of the beauty ideal in the United States is looking eternally young. But a specific type of blepharoplasty is called double eyelid surgery, or Asian blepharoplasty (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, n.d.; Kaw, 1993).

In her research on Asian American women and plastic surgery, Eugenia Kaw (1993) found that most of the Asian American women who sought plastic surgery at the specific site where she conducted her research were seeking double eyelid surgery. Statistics show that in 2018, 27% of all individuals seeking cosmetic surgery were Asian American, Latino, or African American (American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 2018).

What exactly is double eyelid surgery? Many people of certain Asian ancestries are born with a different anatomical structure to their eyelids that results in what some refer to as being

single-lidded rather than double-lidded, as many people of non-Asian ancestry are. This anatomical difference is what makes the eyes of many (but not all) Asian individuals look different from what is considered "normal" among white people in the United States. Note that we should be careful about defining double-lidded as anything approaching normal; 1 in 4 people on the planet are Chinese or of Chinese ancestry, which means that huge shares of the world population are likely to be single-lidded—and this is counting only Asians of Chinese ancestry.

Nonetheless, in the United States, whites and whiteness continue to be important axes for defining the norm, regardless of figures projecting that in the near future, white people will no longer be the statistical majority in the United States. This means that double-lidded eyelids are perceived as the norm and as desirable by many Asian American women. Double eyelid surgery creates this double-lidded look for Asian American men and women. The Asian American women in Kaw's study used double eyelid surgery and other types of cosmetic surgery to improve their appearance, but as Kaw pointed out, there is a specifically racial dimension to these women's pursuit of beauty. When white women elect liposuction or a face-lift, they are seeking to conform to norms of beauty that center around thinness or age, but they are not trying to alter features that are perceived as specific to their racial background. This is because in the United States, "white" features are still generally perceived as the standard against which beauty is measured.

That many Asian American women would want to make themselves appear more like white women is not particularly surprising against this cultural background. How do these women make sense of their decisions? In Kaw's (1993) in-depth interviews with Asian American women, she found that all the women were proud to be Asian American and made no claim to having any desire to look white. Instead, respondents talked about the negative connotations of the facial features typically associated with many Asian faces. A 21-year-old Chinese American woman considered double eyelid surgery to avoid the stereotype of the "Oriental bookworm" who is "dull and doesn't know how to have fun" (Kaw, 1993, p. 79). Another woman in Kaw's study talked about how when she looks at other Asian American women who have not had eyelid surgery, she sees their eyes as "slanted and closed" and thinks about how much better they would look with their eyes more "awake" (Kaw, 1993, p. 79).

Kaw argued that these women were articulating many of the stereotypes associated with Asian Americans in general and Asian American women more specifically. Asian American women are perceived as docile, passive, slow, and unemotional, and the women in Kaw's study came to associate their supposedly Asian features with these negative qualities. By removing the visible symbols of these qualities from their faces, they are increasing their chances for success in a society that generally does not value these qualities. One woman who had double eyelid surgery explained that she would encourage her daughter to have the surgery as well because she believed this would help her daughter in the future in finding better jobs. Because beauty is associated with success for many women, becoming more beautiful by the dominant standards is a means to improving their chances.

Kaw (1993) also pointed out that the cosmetic surgeons whom these women consult about their surgery largely confirm these negative associations between characteristically Asian facial features and personality traits. These doctors add the power of the medical institution to their

"diagnoses," creating a sense that having this set of facial features is in itself "abnormal" and a medical problem that needs to be corrected. In the following quote, Dr. Gee, one of the cosmetic surgeons interviewed by Kaw, described his sense of the importance of double eyelid surgery for Asian Americans:

> I would say 90% of people look better with double eyelids. It makes the eye look more spiritually alive. . . . With a single eyelid frequently they would have a little fat pad underneath [that] can half bury the eye and so the eye looks small and unenergetic. (Kaw, 1993, p. 81)

When these beliefs are presented to Asian American patients in the medical setting of the doctor's office, complete with lab coat and technical equipment for measuring facial features and imagining postoperative appearances, these views of a woman's facial features as in need of correction take on a kind of objective truth.

In the consumer-oriented society of the United States, both the doctors and patients in Kaw's (1993) study argued that Asian American women who elect to have cosmetic surgery are actually asserting their agency and independence in their decision to alter the appearance of their face to conform more closely to white ideals. Cosmetic surgery in this interpretation is not an attempt to conform to any set standards of beauty but rather a way for individuals to use their bodies and the latest technology to sculpt their flesh in unique ways that reflect their own personality and desire. This perspective raises an interesting argument within the literature on beauty and bodies.

## What Is Cosmetic Surgery?

Surgery to modify eye shape or enhance breasts is labeled cosmetic surgery when undertaken by women in the Anglo-European world. What are the similarities and differences between these surgeries undertaken by Asian American women and other surgical procedures undertaken by women in places like Africa and the Middle East? Ethnocentrism, which we discussed in Chapter 5, means that it's much easier for us to point a finger at gender inequalities and gender injustice in other cultures while remaining blind to our own problems. Anglo-European feminists argue that practices like female circumcision are clear human rights abuses. **Female circumcision** (also called female genital mutilation or FGM) is a practice most common in western, eastern, and northeastern regions of Africa, as well as the Middle East and Asia. The procedure may range from clitoridectomy, the surgical removal of the clitoris, to infibulation, which is the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a seal by stitching or repositioning of the labia.

The World Health Organization (2020) defines female genital mutilation as "procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons" and that have no health benefits for girls or women. The procedures can cause severe pain, excessive bleeding, infections, injury to surrounding genital tissues, and in some cases, death. Female circumcision is a part of the culture in the places where it's practiced, and its purposes vary. It may be understood as a way to improve hygiene (similar to justifications for male circumcision)

or for beautification. Others may justify female circumcision as a way to curb female sexuality, to clarify the differences between the sexes, or to enhance male sexual pleasure (Davis, 2002/2017).

If you didn't grow up in a culture where female circumcision is the norm, the practice may seem completely foreign and clearly oppressive. But as Simone Weil Davis (2002/2017) points out, there might be Anglo-European equivalents to female circumcision in the practice of labiaplasty, a relatively recent plastic surgery procedure that involves trimming away labial tissue or sometimes injecting fat from other parts of the body to plump up "droopy" labia. Women come to plastic surgeons asking for the surgery to make their vulva (the outer area surrounding the vagina) look more like those they see in magazines like *Playboy* and in pornographic films. Like female circumcision, the procedure intentionally alters the female genital organs for nonmedical reasons and has no health benefits.

Rather than seeing the practice of female circumcision as clearly distinct from cosmetic surgeries undertaken by women in other parts of the world, perhaps it would be better to see both procedures as on a continuum. Nahid Toubia, executive director of the advocacy group Rainbo, notes that "the thinking of an African woman who believes that 'FGM is the fashionable thing to do to become a real woman' is not so different from that of an American woman who has breast implants to appear more feminine" (Davis, 2002/2017, p. 22). Both African women and American women are subject to cultural pressures to bring their bodies into line with what is seen as acceptable and desirable. Focusing on the similarities between these practices rather than the differences can lead to a deeper conversation about the nature of consent and bodily aesthetics and social control. That is, given societal pressures that exist for both groups of women, how exactly should we define what "consent" to have these procedures means? And how do both cultures use ideas about what our bodies should look like to exert control over women?

## Pretty Boys and Beauty as Power

Early in feminist explorations of the relationship between gender and bodies, the body was considered to be one of the primary tools of patriarchy. The beauty myth outlined by Naomi Wolf (1991) was perceived as a method for maintaining gender inequality. Keeping women focused on their appearance was a clear way to keep them in their place and, therefore, to stifle efforts by women to increase their status and standing in society.

But as feminist critiques evolved, and as the second wave of feminism gave way to the shifts of the third and fourth waves, more feminists began to argue that the pursuit of beauty could in some ways be considered a means of empowerment for women rather than just a primary tool of their oppression (Bordo, 2003; Jeffreys, 2009). In her book *Lipstick Proviso*, Karen Lehrman (1997) argued that women should not have to sacrifice their femininity to achieve gender equality, and those aspects of femininity that should be maintained include the right to wear lipstick and short skirts.

More recently, LGBTQ+ people have become vocal in redefining what beauty means and how it might relate to power, as well as the connections between beauty and gender. What would beauty look like if it were free from the binary of male/female and masculine/feminine?

This is one of the questions journalist-turned-beauty-entrepreneur David Yi asks in his book, *Pretty Boys*, a history of masculine and masculine-identifying beauty icons through the centuries. As Yi argues, most beauty practices have at some point in time been used by men as well as women. In 1300 B.C.E., Babylonian warriors would spend hours in the equivalent of a modern salon before going into battle. There, they'd curl and color their hair, as well as getting manicures and pedicures, all based on the belief that if they were going to die, they might as well look good (Haines, 2021).

In South Korea, the Hwarang warriors of the 600s were chosen for their beauty because the king believed that beautiful men represented the incarnation of a Buddhist god. After searching the kingdom for the most beautiful men, the selected warriors trained in archery and martial arts while also learning beautification as a spiritual practice. Even the Neanderthals dabbed their faces with paleolithic equivalents of foundation and blush, as well as grinding rocks to create highlighter effects on their bodies and faces (Haines, 2021).

These are just a few examples from across history and cultures of men beautifying themselves using techniques that, in 21st-century society, are considered largely feminine. What changed? Yi argues that in European society, the Enlightenment brought different ideas about gender, with women now defined as inherently weak and inferior. Scientific studies demonstrated women were inferior due to their smaller brains and skeletons. Anything associated with women and femininity was seen as weak and therefore not for men, who were the stronger and smarter sex.

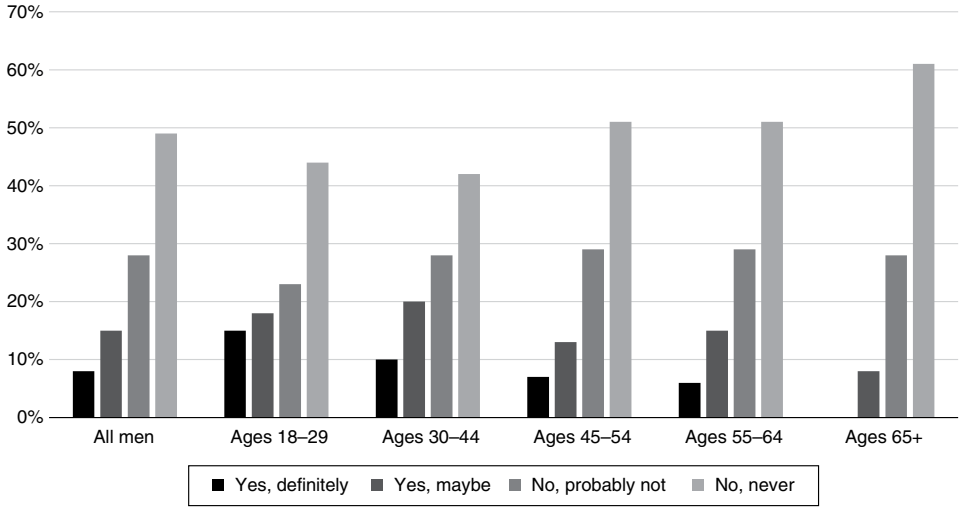
Of course, capitalism in the form of the beauty industry also has a lot to do with the current association between femininity and beauty. During World War II, makeup companies associated women wearing makeup with patriotism and the war effort. Makeup company Elizabeth Arden used slogans like, "if you're not wearing makeup, you're not patriotic" (Haines, 2021).

Yi argues this association between makeup and femininity is changing, and Generation Z is at the forefront of this transformation. Though Yi was called a "pretty boy" when he was growing up, he's now started his own gender-inclusive line of beauty products. Rather than being genderless, Yi's Good Light products seek to affirm and celebrate all different gender identities. As an Asian American man, Yi hopes to also confront the stereotypes associated with Asian American masculinity.

Yi, LGBTQ+ men and other masculine or masculine-identifying beauty influencers emphasize that outside the binary, beauty is a way of expressing authenticity and therefore a form of empowerment, as it was in the past. In fact, many of the beauty practices once associated with drag have become mainstream, especially with the popularity of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The use of contouring, highlighting and the increasing number of cis women wearing fake eyelashes can all be traced back to drag (Sinks, 2022).

Figure 7.1 demonstrates the differences across age cohorts in men's willingness to try makeup. In the youngest cohort—men between the ages of 18 and 29—a third of men express willingness to try makeup, as opposed to only 8% among men over the age of 65. In Figure 7.2, we see age differences in men's attitudes about makeup. Finally, Figure 7.3 demonstrates which types of beauty products men are more or less open to using.

**FIGURE 7.1 ■ One-Third of Men Younger Than 30 Would Try Makeup**




*Source:* Data adapted from Morning Consult, https://morningconsult.com/2019/10/28/as-beauty-norms-blur-one-third-of-young-men-say-theyd-consider-wearing-cosmetics/

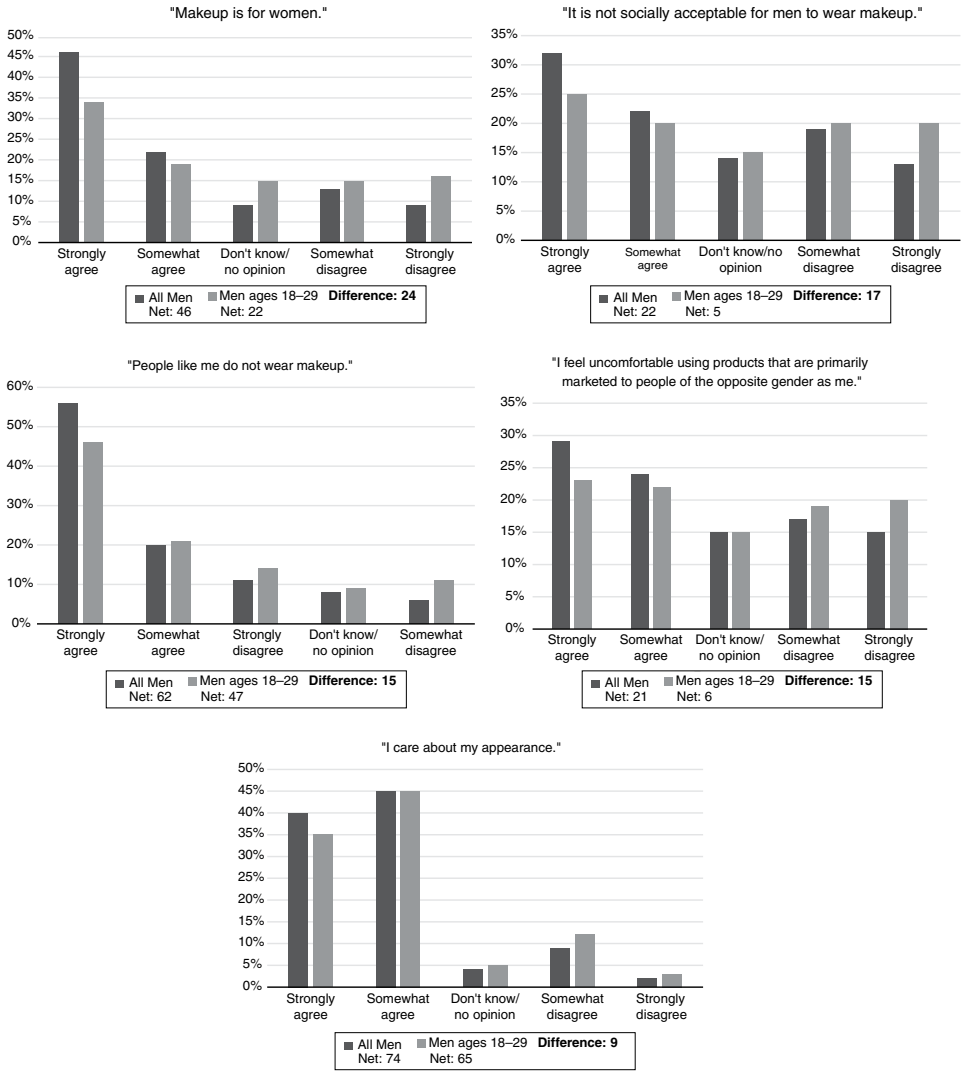
*Note:* Responses collected among 2,124 U.S. men in Sept. 24–26, 2019, poll with a margin of error of +/-2%. Figure may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Do these trends suggest that we increasingly see our bodies as plastic, canvases onto which our identities can be painted? Is this newfound ability a realization of our increasing freedoms or just a new evolution of ways in which we feel compelled to make our bodies conform to cultural norms and ideals? Research suggests that some women who have cosmetic surgery are, in fact, more satisfied with their bodies and their lives after having the surgery (Gimlin, 2002). Liz Frost (1999) argued that "doing looks" for women can be a potential source of pleasure and power, even positively contributing to women's overall mental health. Regardless of the dangers discussed previously, does the improvement in self-esteem outweigh those risks? If Asian American women really do increase their prospects for career success by altering certain facial features to look more stereotypically white, are their decisions not about increasing their sense of empowerment? These are important questions to explore, and they begin to suggest the difficulty of making the simple mind–body distinction that seems so basic to many modes of thinking. If altering our bodies does in fact make us better people or people who are better able to navigate the world successfully, can any kind of body alteration really be wrong?

## Men and Body Image

When we focus on body issues in places like the contemporary United States, the mind–body dualism seems to handicap women in relation to their bodies in ways that, perhaps until recently, were not as true for men. We will consider in a moment how many of the pressures about bodily appearance experienced by women have their equivalencies among

**FIGURE 7.2 ■ Maybe He's Born With It. Maybe It's Disregarding Gender Norms**

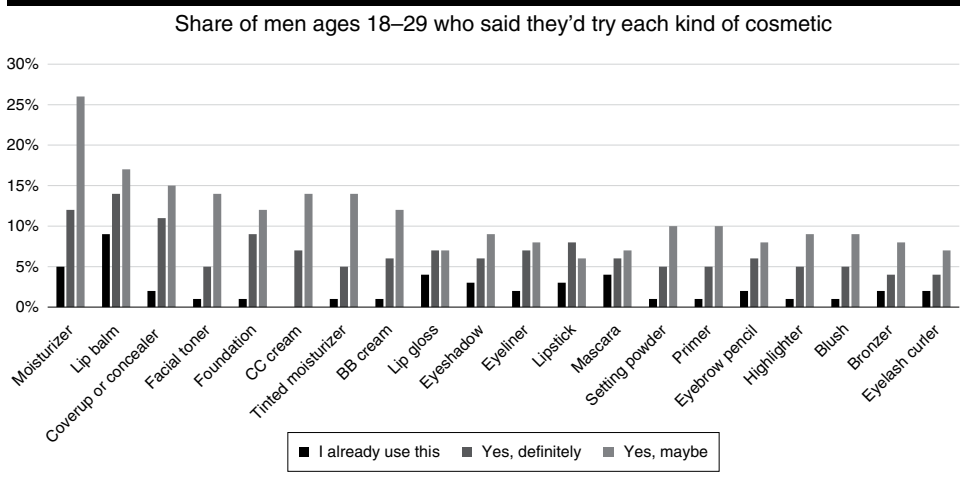



*Source:* Data adapted from Morning Consult, https://morningconsult.com/2019/10/28/as-beauty-norms-blur-one-third-of-young-men-say-theyd-consider-wearing-cosmetics/

*Note:* Responses collected among 2,124 U.S. men in Sept. 24–26, 2019, poll with a margin of error of +/-2%.

men, but it is important to remember that across the globe, male bodies are also used as markers of gender, status, and group membership. In Nazi Germany, male circumcision as a way of marking group membership could have life-or-death consequences. For men, being Jewish was marked by circumcision of the penis, and historically, this has often been an important marker of Jewish identity.

**FIGURE 7.3 ■ Young Men Open to Covering Up but Not Getting Glam**




*Source:* Data adapted from Morning Consult, https://morningconsult.com/2019/10/28/as-beauty-norms-blur-one-third-of-young-men-say-theyd-consider-wearing-cosmetics/

*Note:* Responses collected among 404 U.S. men ages 18–29 in Sept. 24–26, 2019, poll with a margin of error of +/-5%.

That both gender and other kinds of status are inscribed on men's bodies, just as they are on women's, is clear. The question that arises in a discussion of gender and bodies is whether there are important differences in the ways in which gender is inscribed on men's bodies as compared with women's bodies. This debate commonly emerges in my gender courses when we enter our discussion of body image, eating disorders, and the beauty myth. Men and masculine-identifying people in the classroom, many of whom can recount their own lifetime of struggles with being overweight or underweight, and therefore too fat or too skinny to be considered appropriately masculine, point out that they face their own set of issues in relation to bodies. Although the mind–body dualism clearly equates masculinity with the world of the mind, we all know that men have physical bodies. How does the mind–body dualism affect the relationships that men have with their bodies in ways different from those of women? And how are some of the body issues faced by men so similar to those faced by women?

Appearance and physical attractiveness, although they may be expressed differently based on gender, are important determinants of the way people react to us and therefore how we feel about ourselves. Those considered to be more physically attractive, regardless of whether they are men or women, are believed to possess more socially desirable personality traits and are expected to lead happier lives (Zones, 2005). This has important impacts across a wide range of social situations; research demonstrates that cute babies are cuddled more than less attractive babies, attractive toddlers are punished with less frequency, teachers pay more attention to better-looking students, and jurors are more sympathetic to attractive victims in the courtroom. For those fortunate enough to be considered attractive, gliding through a world in which people generally show you more affection, expect more of you, and endow you with many positive

qualities creates a self-fulfilling prophecy; the result is that people considered to be attractive do, in fact, tend to be more socially competent and accomplished (Zones, 2005).

## The Importance of Being Tall

Attractiveness is important for both genders, but it is often perceived differently for women than men. Height can be an especially important component of attractiveness for men in ways that may not be the case for women. Height is important in modern, Anglo-European cultures like the United States in the sense that tallness in men is perceived as more attractive than being short. Studies have demonstrated that taller men are more likely to be trusted and that tall men enjoy an advantage in hiring and promotions relative to their shorter counterparts (Gascaly & Borges, 1979; Gieske, 2000). Height is seen as a sign of leadership potential, including its potential importance in places like West Point to promotion through military ranks (Mazur et al., 1984; Stogdill, 1974). Other research demonstrates that height is a consistent marker of status and rank across many cultures, and it is one aspect of a person's body we assess in our first encounter with a new person. Erving Goffman (1988) noted the importance of height in the positioning of figures in advertisements; a person positioned above someone else, regardless of whether that person was actually taller, was a clear indication of someone with power.

Given these associations, the way in which height becomes an important component in heterosexual coupling is not really all that surprising. From the doing-gender perspective, the strong cultural norm among heterosexual couples dictating that the man should be taller than the woman makes sense. This dynamic serves as a prop that allows men and women to perform gender across many contexts and situations. Specifically, these height differences allow heterosexual couples to act out gender dominance; if height indicates power and status, it makes sense that, in heterosexual couplings, the man should be the taller partner. It is true that on average, men are slightly taller than women. But when we speak of averages, we must keep in mind that this does not mean that a significant number of women are not, in fact, taller than a significant number of men.

It is also true, as an interesting side note, that the average differences between the heights of men and women have been decreasing historically, according to the records available (Schiebinger, 2000). Although our height is determined in part by genetics, nutrition is also an important factor in determining eventual height; some scholars speculate that women are closing the height gap because girls in many places around the world are no longer deprived of valuable food resources that, in the past, would have been given to boys instead. Men still maintain a slight height advantage on average over women, but this in itself does not lead to the logical outcome that all tall men should pair themselves with shorter women. Although it's difficult for us to imagine, the norm could just as easily be for tall women to pair off with shorter men.

In fact, that men should tower over women has not always been the norm in Anglo-European cultures. The reaction for many people of seeing a heterosexual couple whose heights violate these assumed norms is similar in some ways to the reaction to interracial couples or other couples who clearly violate a basic norm we have about the proper way of heterosexually

pairing off. These couples seem to represent a fundamental reversal of our basic gender assumptions; the taller woman is attempting to "be the man" by dominating her partner, while the man is relinquishing his power but also demonstrating his specialness as someone who was "chosen" despite his height.

In the 18th century among the European aristocracy, there were no norms governing the height of heterosexual couples. A woman could be taller than her husband in her natural state, but even if she wasn't, the fashion norms of the time often made women appear to tower over their mates. The fashion among aristocratic women included high heels and sometimes towering wigs, and both of these tended to give women a distinct height advantage over the men accompanying them.

Sabine Gieske (2000), in her history of height and coupling, argued that these gender norms changed because of shifting ideas about social class in the 18th century. During this period in Europe, the middle class was on the rise, and the middle class sought to define themselves in opposition to the aristocracy. Gender distinctions among the aristocracy were less important than class distinctions, and aristocratic women were often able to obtain a certain level of financial independence, education, and political influence. As the emerging middle class defined a new set of values, the differences between women and men became important components of this new culture. As such, cartoons and caricatures from this transitional period showed the height and body differences between men and women among the aristocracy as dangerous to the social order and unnatural. The bodily differences between women and men, previously considered unremarkable, became the focus of science and popular writing.

The small differences in stature between women and men became important justifications for a relatively new set of gender relations, which considered women to be the "weaker sex." Advice from experts on the proper height matching between couples continued to be contradictory, and up until 1889, scientists and scholars wrote that the choice of a spouse should be largely independent of stature (Gieske, 2000). By the 20th century, the norm of a taller man with a shorter woman was firmly entrenched, thus enacting predominant notions of men's physical superiority. This historical case is an interesting example of intersectionality, as we discussed in Chapter 2. Remember that intersectionality directs our attention to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities such as social class, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Here, gender differences were used as a tool to create and reinforce important class differences in 19th-century Europe.

In today's societies, these assumed height differentials can create problems for "vertically challenged" men as well as for "vertically advantaged" (or "disadvantaged," depending on your perspective) women. There are real advantages for men in being taller, both in terms of attracting potential mates and in the sense of the benefits that accrue to those viewed as attractive in general. As early as the 18th century, various tools promised men the ability to either appear or actually become taller. Historians of gender and the body note that the top hat, popular in the 19th century, was one relatively simple means of allowing men to hide any height deficiencies (Gieske, 2000). Other advertisers promised muscle- and ligament-stretching techniques in the 19th century, while today, hormones are sold for some of the same purposes.

## Masculinity, Puberty, and Embodiment

Height is one way in which masculinity is played out on men's bodies. Social science research reveals that in general, men worry about their physical appearance for reasons both functional and aesthetic. The power associated with masculinity, as we saw earlier, is assumed to be rooted in masculine bodies. Men, like women, work on their bodies to achieve the ideal masculine physique (Jackson & Lernay, 2018; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004; Mora, 2012; Pope et al., 2000). Both boys and men consider "flabby" bodies to be less masculine (Grogan & Richards, 2002; Lilleaas, 2007).

The bodies of boys and men are also judged for their functional purposes—for what they can do with their bodies. In school settings, the masculinity and social standing of boys are based in part on their physical dexterity, strength, and athleticism (Davison, 2000; Eder et al., 1995). Sports are an especially important arena in which boys use their bodies to demonstrate masculinity, allowing them to amass "physical capital" and gain masculine status (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Swain, 2000, 2003).

This is all another way of saying that masculinity, like femininity, is embodied. **Embodiment** is understood as a social process through which women and men as active social agents develop their bodies as both the objects and agents of practice (Swain, 2003). From this perspective, bodies are not passive objects onto which the social is produced, but neither do bodies determine how we experience the world as social beings. Embodiment describes a reciprocal relationship between bodies and our social experiences of them. Through body-reflexive practice, we experience ourselves as both *in* and *as* our bodies (Connell, 2000). Bodies can be seen both as something separate from us—as space we dwell inside—and as inseparable from who we are. Embodiment points us to the ways in which our bodies are important parts of our identities and biographies; the making of our bodies is also the making of our selves (Swain, 2003).

As we discussed earlier in relation to girls and shaving, puberty can be a time of intense engagement between the lived experience of gender and bodies. Puberty is a good example of a deeply embodied experience. The bodies of both boys and girls go through radical changes at puberty. The social context of the culture we live in as well as our identities such as race, social class, religion, and sexual orientation provide the backdrop that helps us to make sense of these bodily changes.

In his ethnographic study of Latino boys, Richard Mora (2012) examined how boys made sense of puberty as a social and a biological experience. The boys in Mora's study were second-generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. The ideal male body, from their perspective, was strong, lean, muscular, and fit. As sixth-graders, the boys had not achieved this type of physique. They would vie for the distinction of being the strongest or the best equipped to carry heavy boxes for a teacher in order to demonstrate how close they were to this ideal. They compared the size of their flexed biceps and the firmness of their stomachs daily. When one boy drew a picture of his friends as he imagined them 5 or 6 years in the future, they all had extremely muscular arms and chests with relatively small waists. Because the ideal male body was strong and capable of fighting, the boys monitored themselves for what they called "flubber," or any sign of flabbiness. Boys who had flubber engaged in self-deprecating humor or made claims to other forms of physical prowess. For example, one boy claimed, "I

don't care if I don't have a six-pack [defined abdominal muscles]. I got muscles. That's why you couldn't take the ball away from me [during a basketball game]" (Mora, 2012, p. 447).

The boys also experienced anxiety about puberty itself, and their bodily changes often formed the basis of their conversations. When a boy appeared "wild," other boys were likely to jokingly suggest, "Control your hormones!" (Mora, 2012, p. 444). The boys understood penises to be associated with manhood and dominance. They frequently brought up genitalia in order to establish their own masculine identity or disparage the masculinity of other boys. One of the smaller boys, Rudy, was teased for his small physical size. The other boys called him "shrimp," "small fry," or "enano [midget]" (Mora, 2012, p. 444). His small physical size was assumed to be a sign of the small size of his penis as well, a clear example of the interplay between bodies and the creation of gender identity. Rudy could clearly not be as masculine as the other boys because of his smaller body size.

Mora's research demonstrates the ways in which this particular group of boys both used their bodies as instruments in demonstrating their claims to masculinity and were limited by the physical stuff of their bodies. Having "flubber" was seen as an impediment to masculinity—a physical limit on boys' ability to make claims to manhood. Yet boys could argue that other characteristics balanced out the presence of flubber. Muscles and athletic ability might trump the presence of flabbiness. For boys like Rudy, the physical limitations of their body (being small) had real effects on their ability to assert a masculine gender identity. Embodiment reveals the ways in which the relationship between gender and bodies is complex and reciprocal.

## Transgender Bodies and Puberty

Puberty is a complicated and chaotic time for cisgender boys like Rudy, whose gender identity lines up with their gender assignment. For trans kids like Nathan, the stakes at puberty can be even higher. As a trans boy, Nathan hated his postpubescent body so much that he engaged in self-harm. The top surgery (to remove breasts) that Nathan wanted so badly was outside the financial reach of his family. Nathan's mother was terrified that he might do further harm to himself, including suicide, because of his lack of access (Travers, 2021).

Nathan's story highlights some of the dynamics faced by trans kids and trans people in relation to their bodies. In a world where gender is seen as so deeply embodied, it's problematic to find yourself in a body that does not match your sense of who you are as a gendered person. In the not-so-distant past, when children expressed the sense that their gender identity was not the same as the gender they'd been assigned, they were sent to psychologists to be "cured" through "reparative" or "corrective" therapy (Travers, 2021). This was especially true of boys like Kraig, who along with many other gender-nonconforming boys in the 1970s, was sent to UCLA's "feminine boy project." This government-funded experiment used shame-inducing treatments, including, in Kraig's case, encouraging his father to beat Kraig when he failed to conform to masculine norms. As an adult, Kraig committed suicide.

A paradigm shift in the treatment of transgender kids in recent years means that most professional medical and psychological associations now recommend gender-affirming care. Affirming treatment encourages families to accept their child's gender identity and supports them in dealing with any resulting discrimination or mental health issues. Research tells us that

affirming care, in the form of family support, social support, and access to supportive health care, creates the best outcomes for trans kids. There are two main goals of affirming care.

The first goal of medical treatment is to buy time for the young person, and this is where puberty-suppression therapy, or hormone blockers, come in. Hormone blockers give gender-nonconforming kids extra time to explore their gender identity before the onset of secondary sex characteristics that come with puberty. The second goal is a more "normal" and satisfactory appearance, and in the long term, hormone blockers help with this, too. FTM (female-to-male) or trans boys who use hormone blockers will not need the top surgery Nathan so desperately wanted. MTF (male-to-female) or trans girls using hormone blockers won't need to deal with facial hair, a deeper voice, and a prominent Adam's apple that might otherwise have developed during puberty (Travers, 2021).

This is why the spread of legislation in the United States that blocks access to gender affirming care for trans youth is especially dangerous. As of this writing, four states (Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, and Texas) have enacted such legislation, while 15 states are considering similar laws (Dawson et al., 2022). These laws contribute to a growing division in the experiences of trans kids—those who have access to puberty-suppression therapy and those who don't.

While Nathan's mother worried about his mental health and his life, 7-year-old Esme has parents who are supportive of her gender identity and have access to gender-affirming care. She plans to take hormone blockers when she's old enough, followed by cross-sex hormones. Together, these will help her achieve the body that's consistent with her gender identity. Research tells us that trans kids like Esme, who have access to hormone blockers, will be more likely to have reduced mental health vulnerability as adults (Travers, 2021).

**Bodily autonomy**—the ability to make decisions about what happens to our bodies—is important to trans kids, and adult bodies are part of how many trans and nonbinary people realize their gender identity. But predominant narratives about trans experiences also create a harmful obsession in the media with trans bodies. As Laverne Cox describes in her documentary on the depiction of transgender people in the media, *Disclosure*, interviewers repeatedly asked her detailed questions about her genitalia that would never be appropriate for a cisgender person (Feder, 2020).

Trans scholar and activist Julia Serano (2011) cites numerous examples of her own experiences with this obsessions with trans bodies. At a literary event where she read a piece about the murder of a trans woman, an audience member asked if she's had electrolysis on her face. After a program for college students on the gender binary, a student asked her several question about whether or not she'd had a sex-change operation. After creating a website about her transition, she received an angry e-mail demanding she include before and after pictures of her gender-affirming surgery, even though she'd included extensive descriptions of the process. Serano speculates that this obsession doesn't open up a space to explore gender in all its flexibility and variability but rather confirms people's existing beliefs in the binary, as projected onto bodies. This person had male genitalia and now they have female genitalia, and therefore, the binary is still in place.

The media and popular culture often reinforce this obsession and binary-focused narrative. When trans people are depicted on TV and in the movies, the focus often becomes a scene in which the "true" gender of the person is revealed in dramatic fashion. The "discovery" of

their trans identity is often met with revulsion and disgust by other characters. This scene has become a trope in popular culture. In the 1992 film *The Crying Game*, Stephen Rhea's character throws up when he discovers that Dil, his love interest, is a trans woman. In *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994), Jim Carrey's character throws up repeatedly then removes and throws away all his clothes after discovering the person he kissed in a previous scene is a trans woman. Though this level of disgust at trans women would be seen as unacceptable today, trans women are still more likely to be depicted as criminals (Talusan, 2016).

## IS MASCULINITY BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH?

Puberty can cause bodily anxiety for cis boys and trans kids alike. Is gender, in the form of masculinity, bad for men's health in general? Don Sabo (2009) argued that traditional ideas of masculinity can, in fact, pose a real danger to men's health. Most people are probably aware that women, on average, live longer than men in most societies across the globe. Worldwide, on average, a girl born in 2015 can expect to live to 71, while a boy's life expectancy is 69 (Hutt, 2016). This gap widened for much of the 20th century, mostly due to the decrease in maternal mortality, or the number of women dying during or after childbirth. Men's higher rates of smoking also contributed to this gap.

More recently in the U.S., men's life expectancy decreased by 2 years as a specific result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Globally, the death rate from COVID is about 50% higher in men than in women, and this difference does not appear to be explained by the number of cases or the existence of pre-existing conditions. In the U.S., the overall death rate from COVID for men is 1.6 times the death rate for women, and the gap is widest for middle-aged men, with 184 male deaths for every 100 female deaths (Reeves & Deng, 2021). Researchers are still uncertain why these gender differences exist.

Thinking about life expectancies in general begins to reveal some of the underlying explanations for differences in women's and men's overall health as well as demonstrating the incredible power of gender in our lives. Men around the world live shorter lives than women in part because of the choices they make, like choosing to smoke. Why would men, on average, be more likely to smoke than women? The answer for many who study masculinity and health helps to explain more than just men's relatively higher rates of smoking. Many hegemonic masculinities, as they are constructed in the developed world, encourage risk-taking behaviors.

This certainly varies across the many types of masculinities that exist across the wide spectrum of society, but the information on death and other health-related behaviors indicates that masculinity is an important force leading men to take more risks with their bodies, on average, than women. For example, morbidity, as opposed to mortality, addresses the prevalence of disease, illness, and injury. Women, on average, are more likely to suffer from a host of chronic illnesses than are men (Sabo, 2009). These chronic illnesses do not necessarily lead to death but to a difficult and uncomfortable life.

The area of morbidity in which men do exceed women is in their tendency to sustain injuries. What do smoking and being more prone to being injured have in common? Both can be considered risk-taking behaviors. Men are more likely to be injured through their attempts to

demonstrate masculinity in reckless ways; through their higher levels of involvement in contact sports like American football, rugby, and boxing; and as a result of the types of jobs many men are more likely to work, especially working-class men, whose jobs can put them in a great deal of danger.

In interviews with men from working-class backgrounds in Australia, Connell (1995/2005) documented the high incidence of violence in these men's encounters with power in many forms. The stories these men told seemed, to Connell's eyes, filled with fights, beatings, brawls, assaults, bashings, and sometimes knifings. The men were both the perpetrators and the victims of violence, whether being caned by cruel teachers in their schools or beaten by their fathers or other family members (including sisters).

These experiences led to a general code regarding violence among these men, namely, that violence is OK when justified. The main way in which violence was always justified was when the other man started it. Among these working-class young men, their violent encounters with the authority of school figures eventually led to hostility toward other authority figures in general, including the police. When these boys left school, some eventually found themselves in jail and encountered the violence inherent in those institutional settings as well. Among the other risky behaviors these men engaged in were speeding in cars, trucks, and bikes (three of the young men owned motorbikes, and another two were passionate about biking). At least one of the young men Connell interviewed had also been involved in a police chase, complete with a roadblock and a serious crash.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of other examples of risky behaviors that men seem more likely to participate in than women? Is this true of all men? What types of men do you think are more or less likely to be risk takers? What kinds of things do you think would make women more likely to be risk takers?*

Connell's research demonstrates an important contradiction about the relationship between many men and their bodies. Relative to women, they may experience a much greater degree of agency in their bodies. The sports men play may be dangerous and violent, but they also provide a feeling of empowerment and accomplishment. At the same time, masculinity encourages men to act in ways that frequently place their bodies at great risk of physical harm. Certainly, the most extreme examples of these truths relate to the rather grim statistics regarding homicide and suicide among men.

Although women in the United States are more likely to attempt suicide than men, men make successful suicide attempts almost 4 times more often than women (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2015). *Successful* here refers to suicide attempts that actually lead to death, and men are better at obtaining this outcome, in large part as a result of the more violent means they employ in attempting to end their lives. Men are more likely to use guns or

to hang themselves, as opposed to women's more common use of pills (Sabo, 2009). Homicide is the second leading cause of death among men ages 15 to 19 in the United States, and men ages 15 to 34 make up almost half of all homicide victims in the United States (Sabo, 2009). Many studies have demonstrated that men are also disproportionately the perpetrators of homicide; one study of 600 murders in the United States found that men were the perpetrators in 95% of the cases (Barash, 2002).

One way of understanding these risk-taking, aggressive, and sometimes violent behaviors in men is through another essential feature of Anglo-European hegemonic masculinity as outlined by David and Brannon (1976). David and Brannon's four rules of manhood included the idea of "**No Sissy Stuff**" (don't act feminine or associate with anything feminine) and "**Be a Sturdy Oak**" (don't show emotions). A third component of manhood is "Give 'em Hell," and it is certainly well suited to explaining many of the behaviors we've discussed in relation to masculinity. **Give 'em Hell** dictates that real men exude an aura of "manly daring and aggression," that they "go for it" and "take risks" (David & Brannon, 1976, p. 199). This aspect of the dominant way of defining manhood is positive in that it certainly can encourage acts of physical bravery and courage. But as we've seen, this imperative of manhood can also pose great risks to men's overall health.

The way in which this Give 'em Hell ideology contributes to men's increased levels of violence directed toward themselves and others is not surprising given the way that connections between masculinity and violence are institutionalized in many cultures. The most common institutionalization of male violence is through the military and war. Although men's frequent obligation to perform military service can be considered a means of controlling male bodies, men also gain great prestige from going to war if they survive; their service reinforces the masculine norm that men's bodies are meant to be risked and sacrificed in the service of some crucial set of values. Theodore Roosevelt made this connection among masculinity, sports, and war explicit. Roosevelt encouraged the spread of "manly" sports such as football because he was concerned that men were becoming physically feeble under industrialization. Men working office jobs would not be able to defend our country come wartime because of the inactivity of their lifestyles. Football could help men continue to develop not just the physical abilities necessary for warfare but the principles of toughness and self-sacrifice as well.

## Masculinity, Health, and Race

This connection between masculinity and the Give 'em Hell ideology can pose more or less risk for different types of men. Among men in the United States, bodies can be impacted in different ways by their culture and can have very different meanings placed on them. Class, race, and masculinity intersect to make the simple act of making a living a hazardous proposition for many men. Immigrant populations in the United States have always been forced into the occupations least desired by dominant groups, and those undesirable jobs are often the most dangerous. Slaughterhouses have a long history of using male immigrant labor, initially in the large cities of the Midwest like Chicago and more recently in rural areas in Iowa. Upton Sinclair (1906) documented the horrors of slaughterhouse work for the human workers, the animals, and the consumers who would eventually eat the meat.

Today's slaughterhouses are not a considerable improvement over those of the past, with an injury rate 3 times greater than in any other kind of factory in the United States. Each year, about a quarter of the 40,000 men and women working in these jobs suffer a work-related injury or illness that requires medical attention beyond first aid (Schlosser, 2002). In some slaughterhouses, 50% of workers are Hispanic, often including illegal workers who have less ability to fight back against unsafe occupational practices. Daily cleanup of the slaughterhouse is the most dangerous job, as well as the most poorly paid. The percentage of Hispanic immigrants in this occupation is even higher.

Working dangerous jobs is just one factor among many that contributes to dramatic discrepancies in the health and welfare of men of color and working-class men as compared with white and middle-class men in the United States. The long history of discrimination faced by Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos in the United States becomes literally etched onto their bodies. The average life expectancy of a Black man in the United States is about 4 years less than that of his white male counterpart (71.9 and 76.4 years, respectively; EPA, 2019), while for Native American men, the difference is 5 years (71 years; Arias, 2007). Native Americans as a group have the highest rates of obesity (36%) and cigarette smoking (38%; Gallagher, 2007).

For Black men living in Harlem, which is 96% African American, survival rates beyond the age of 40 are lower than those for men living in Bangladesh, casting some doubt on development models that believe places like the United States are healthier. African American men have higher rates of alcoholism, infectious diseases, and drug-related conditions than their white counterparts, but the health care they receive is likely to be inferior. The rate at which Black men older than age 13 contract AIDS is almost 5 times higher than the rate for white males. These figures have led some scholars to describe young African American men as an endangered species (Sabo, 2009).

Being in an African American male body is a dangerous proposition. But in an interesting irony, the bodies of Black men are viewed as dangerous to others in situations as mundane as walking down a city street. *New York Times* editor Brent Staples (2009) described some of the reactions he commonly encounters as a Black man, as well as what it feels like to be the one causing those reactions. The "hunch posture" is how he describes the body language of women he encounters after dark in Brooklyn: "They seem to set their faces on neutral and, with their purse straps strung across their chests bandolier style, they forge ahead as though bracing themselves against being tackled" (Staples, 2009, p. 194). Being perceived as dangerous largely because of the symbolism attached to the body you occupy takes its own psychological toll. Staples also described being mistaken for a burglar in his own place of employment. He was chased around the building by security until he reached his editor's office and the safety of someone who knew him to be employed at the newspaper.

For many Black men, the power of their bodies as images of danger and violence leads them to carefully monitor their actions in what many white people would consider a routine, if unwanted, encounter like being pulled over by the police. Articles and books have been written to counsel Black men on how to behave in their encounters with the police, with good reason. In America's 10 largest cities, the percentage of victims of police shootings who are Black exceeds the percentage of Black people in the total population for that city, suggesting

that African Americans are victims of police violence at a much higher rate than their representation in the population.

This perception about the danger of Black male bodies makes being an African American man dangerous, and it is tied to a long history of shifting images of race and gender in the United States. At various points in this history, Black bodies have been depicted as more durable (the strong body of the African American slave woman as compared with the feeble and sickly white, upper-class woman in the 19th century) or as sickly (in the early part of the 20th century, medical scientists predicted African Americans were an inferior race that would naturally die out without the protection of slavery) or as superhuman (as in some current racial ideology about the superior biological and physical athletic abilities of Black men and women). In all of these moments, we observe how the gender of bodies is always complicated by the intersection of gender with other identities, such as race, class, nationality, and sexuality.

That masculinity itself leads to more risk-taking behavior and more dangerous lives in a variety of ways is the first way in which being a man can be perceived as hazardous to your health. The second way in which masculinity might affect the health of men is through their decreased likelihood of seeking help for their health problems. Namely, men may be less likely to admit that they need help or to seek out help when it comes to health issues. Men fail to perform the kinds of behaviors necessary for maintaining health (Kilmartin, 1994). Men are more likely to stop taking medications that manage chronic and life-threatening diseases such as high blood pressure. They are less likely to take time off from work when they are sick or injured. Although prostate and colorectal cancers are common diseases among older men (affecting nearly 75% of men older than age 50), 50% of the male population does not know the symptoms of these cancers or of prostate enlargement, a precursor to prostate cancer. Some research demonstrates that women experience more acute illnesses and some chronic illnesses than men, but the type of chronic illness is important. Acute illnesses include respiratory conditions, infective and parasitic conditions, and digestive system disorders, and in these categories, women exceed men. Among chronic illnesses, women are more likely to suffer from anemia, migraine headaches, arthritis, diabetes, and thyroid disease (Sabo, 2009).

But when it comes to the most life-threatening of the chronic diseases, men tend to take the lead over their female counterparts (Kilmartin, 1994). For example, the male-to-female ratio for heart disease as a cause of death is 101:100, which means that for every 100 women who die of heart disease, 101 men also die of heart disease. This seems like a relatively small difference, but when you look specifically at age groups, a different picture emerges. Among those ages 24 to 44, the ratio of male-to-female deaths from heart disease is 283:100. Thirty-five percent of the population in the United States will eventually die of heart disease at some point in their life, but men are more likely to die much earlier from the disease than are women. Men also die at greater rates than women from every type of cancer except breast cancer.

At first glance, these statistics seem to suggest again that perhaps men are genetically weaker than women and less equipped to survive the barrage of chronic and acute diseases that afflict many of those in the global North. But a more likely explanation again has to do with the particular demands masculinity places on men in places like the United States. To admit you are sick and to seek help is a sign of vulnerability and weakness. Seeking help and acknowledging

pain go against Brannon's manhood rule to "Be a Sturdy Oak." Studies of testicular cancer, a common disease among men, suggest that denial is an important barrier to treatment. Many men do not know about testicular cancer, and those who do may recognize symptoms but still not go to a doctor to seek treatment (Sabo, 2009). These tendencies suggest that many of the differences in overall health reported between women and men may reflect men's reluctance to identify themselves as sick as much as they suggest actual differences in the rates at which women and men suffer from illnesses. Women report higher rates of digestive disorders, but perhaps this is merely because women are more likely to admit that something is wrong with them and to therefore show up in these reports.

According to official statistics, there seems to be a gender difference in rates of depression, with women being more likely to suffer from this disease than men. But Terrence Real (1997) pointed out that the way classic depression is defined in the medical community misses the ways in which the symptoms of depression among men can be quite different. As a result of their gender socialization, women tend to internalize their emotional and psychological pain, while men externalize these feelings. Although male psychiatric patients are more likely to be violent, female psychiatric patients are more likely to engage in self-mutilation.

Because depression is considered to be a feminine disease by both sufferers and clinicians, men are far less likely to seek help for their depression or to recognize their problems as stemming from depression. Depression is perceived as a wimpy disease even though it can turn deadly in the form of suicide. Depression falls under the category of "sissy stuff" in the definition of modern manhood, and it is therefore not something real men have. In this way, the masculine reluctance to admit vulnerability and to seek help is another factor potentially contributing to men's shorter lives, thereby making masculinity a somewhat dangerous prospect.

Gender matters for the diagnosis and treatments of other forms of neurodiversity as well. **Neurodiversity** is a concept that rejects previous notions that there is something called a "normal" brain and people with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or depression who then depart from that "normal." Growing research suggests that because many of the indicators of neurodiversity surface in different ways for women, they're less likely to be diagnosed. Women with ADHD are more likely to not be diagnosed until adulthood than men. This delay is attributed to women's ADHD manifesting less as hyperactivity and more as inattention. Girls with ADHD daydream and are shy. This makes them less disruptive in classrooms, and their ADHD is often ignored by teachers and parents (Ryle, 2022). Girls are also less likely to be diagnosed as autistic, because girls and women modify their behaviors to disguise the usual indicators of autism. Instead of engaging in repetitive motions—one of the classic indicators of autism—girls might instead clench their jaws or tighten their thigh muscles. Restricted interests is another symptom of autism—obsessions with things like numbers or baseball scores. But girls' obsessions with celebrities, animals, or dolls are dismissed as normal girl behavior (Ryle, 2022).

## Women, Doctors, Midwives, and Hormones

Just as the ways in which gender becomes internalized in the bodies of men and women affects how long they live, what diseases they get, and how everyone around them reacts to their bodies,

gender is also important to the question of how to take care of bodies—to the practice of medicine and health care. Gender has been important in determining who occupies the jobs that involve taking care of bodies as well as in influencing the ways in which narratives about feminine and masculine health are constructed. The mind–body dualism becomes important again when doctors think about a whole host of diseases and syndromes that are unique to women and connected to women's supposedly closer relationship to the body.

What happened when people became ill before there were doctors? And exactly how long have doctors been around? The answers to these questions all depend on exactly what you mean by *doctor*. Many cultures designate some person or group of people as responsible for healing. But is healing what doctors actually do? In the early history of the United States, there were people who called themselves doctors, but most of the population didn't necessarily go to these people for help when they were sick, injured, or about to give birth. The tradition of medicine that primarily male, American doctors were attempting to recreate in the United States was based on some training in Latin and on reading the works of Greek and Roman philosophers. This training involved almost no experience with actual sick people and was based on a theory of illness that held that air, water, and light were the main causes of illness. Those acquainted with these theories lived in fear of getting wet or being subjected to a breeze, rarely bathed, and kept their houses closed off to any kind of outside ventilation. Doctors knew that blood circulated, but they had no idea how, and the search was for the one disease that was believed to cause all illnesses. This was the period when bloodletting and purging (inducing vomiting) were the main tools at doctors' disposal, and one of the most commonly used drugs was calomel, a mercury salt. This poisonous substance was used for maladies ranging from diarrhea to teething pain, and long-term use caused the gums, teeth, tongue, and entire jaw to erode and eventually fall off (Ehrenreich & English, 1978).

The doctors of the time were mostly male, and it's little wonder that most people did not use them. Up into the 18th century, when people in the United States became sick or injured, they turned largely to women as healers. Like their European counterparts, many of whom had been prosecuted and murdered as witches in the 15th and 16th centuries, women healers in the United States learned their craft through centuries of accumulated wisdom. Healers in the United States added the knowledge they gained from Native Americans and African slave communities to their repertoire of healing tools. Goldenseal powder and pennyroyal as an herbal remedy came from Native Americans, while the use of cayenne pepper was learned from transplanted Africans in the West Indies. Women healers, like their male medical counterparts, had nothing resembling what we would now call a rational theory of disease.

But unlike male doctors, female healers used gentle cures that largely encouraged the natural abilities of the body to heal itself. Male doctors employing "heroic medicine," such as bloodletting and purging, often did more harm than good in their quest to appear to be doing something rather dramatic to heal the patient. Bloodletting generally involved bleeding an individual until she or he fainted or the pulse stopped, whichever happened first. This was dramatic but not generally as effective as the remedies of female healers, whose more subtle methods did less harm to the sick patient. In one account, a patient dying of a fever was visited by a female healer. The woman opened the doors and windows previously ordered closed by the doctor (to

keep out the dangerous, disease-causing air) and bathed the patient with cold water, still a common method for alleviating fever. The patient, assumed to be at death's door, felt better within 5 minutes and eventually recovered (Ehrenreich & English, 1978).

Part of the reason male doctors engaged in the dramatic and dangerous practice of heroic medicine was to convince their patients that their services were in fact worth the money to be paid. Female healers were generally less likely to ask for money in return for their services, because healing was considered to be a system of reciprocity and community building. In addition, the services provided by female healers were much more holistic than the program male doctors had in mind. Early doctors in the United States had to convince people that healing was something real and tangible that could be provided in exchange for money; they had to figure out how to **commodify** healing, to turn it into something that could be bought and sold.

This problem still faces the medical community, but it was especially acute against the historical dominance of women healers. Healing involved more than just a particular drug or technique; it included the many kindnesses and encouragements delivered by the healer and the knowledge that she had at her disposal about the strengths and fears of her patient. Midwives often moved in with the family of a pregnant woman long before the birth and stayed with her until she fully recovered from childbirth. Healing was something deeply embedded in a web of human relationships, and the new field of medicine had to convince people that healing could be plucked out of that complex network as something to be bought and sold (Ehrenreich & English, 1978).

The complete control of doctors and the medical field over healing in the United States was not fully accomplished until the beginning of the 20th century, and when it was finished, women, as well as anyone but the most economically privileged classes, were almost completely shut out of medicine. Science triumphed within medicine over folk healing, and scientific medicine required the presence of a laboratory. Although under a more flexible system of training for doctors that existed up until the 1900s, there were many women as well as working-class and African American doctors, the need to fund laboratories pushed the cost of medical training far beyond the reach of these groups.

In their book on the history of expert advice for women, *For Her Own Good*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1978) argued that this was no mere coincidence. Male doctors purposefully sought to carve out a niche for themselves through the development of medicine as a profession and, therefore, as the exclusive domain of a limited set of people, mainly upper-class, white men. Prior to this consolidation, there were 10 exclusively female medical schools as well as seven Black medical schools. All but three of the female medical schools closed, while African Americans lost all but two.

The last bit of territory still claimed by women was, not surprisingly, childbirth. As recently as 1900 in the United States, 50% of babies were delivered by midwives. These midwives were responsible not just for delivering the baby but also often for all the rituals that still surrounded childbirth (and, potentially, death) for many of the lower- and working-class individuals whom the midwife served. The male medical profession was not concerned with midwives so much because of the competition they presented, as they had been in their previous crusade to eliminate female healers and nonscientific forms of medicine. Few doctors at the time specialized in what we would now call gynecology and obstetrics. Rather, the midwives stood in the way of the

scientific development of medicine. Young doctors needed experience observing live patients, including live women giving birth. If a disproportionate number of women used midwives to give birth, how would these generations of young doctors ever be trained?

From this dilemma, we gain an understanding of the historical relationship between training hospitals and charity hospitals that exists to this day in the United States. Those who were wealthy during the time period would certainly never consent to have a room full of male doctors observing the most intimate process of childbirth. The poor, who had no choice, were the best options for the training of new doctors, and so hospitals began to attach themselves to the nearest charity hospital to provide *material* in the form of the sick bodies of the poor. The overall campaign against midwives specifically portrayed them as dirty and un-American. Midwives were common among many of the new immigrant groups of the time period, and eradicating midwifery became synonymous with the task of assimilating these new groups into the "American" way of life. Although some midwives were dirty, as in less than hygienic in their practices, a solution could have been a training program for midwives, which was what England *did* elect to do with their midwives.

Nonetheless, between 1900 and 1930, midwives were effectively eliminated in most of the United States, through legal means or general harassment. This removed the last vestiges of feminine control over the health of bodies in the United States and made medicine a distinctly male profession for roughly the next 30 to 40 years. That this is hardly inevitable is demonstrated by the Russian case; as a result of different historical circumstances, Russian women began entering the medical field during a time when there was a dire shortage of doctors. Perhaps as a direct result, doctors in today's Russia are 70% female, compared with the United States, where female doctors in 2019 made up only 36.3% of the total population of physicians (Boyle, 2021; Ehrenreich & English, 1978).

## Women's Bodies Are the Undiscovered Country

Perhaps this male dominance in the field of medicine helps explain why, in 2022, we know more about the depths of the ocean and the vast reaches of space than we do about women's bodies. Take the clitoris, a part of women's anatomy that has been long dismissed, demeaned, and misunderstood. In fact, the first physician to dissect the clitoris named it the *membre honteux,* or "shameful member" (Gross, 2020). This is just one example of the ways in which the language around women's anatomy focuses on shame. The Latin word used to describe the vulva, which includes the inner and outer labia, clitoris, and pubic mound, is pudendum, which translates as 'the part to be ashamed of' (Gross, 2021).

This shame may explain why it took 2,000 years for doctors to discover the true shape of the clitoris. In its Greek origins, clitoris translates as "little hill" or "to rub," probably a play on words. But it took until 2005 for Australian urologist Helen O'Connell to discover that the clitoris is far more than a "little hill" or a nub, as was previously believed. The visible part of the clitoris is, as O'Connell described, just the tip of the iceberg. As an organ, the clitoris is 10 times the size previously assumed and contains 2 to 3 times the nerve endings of the penis. The clitoris extends into the pelvic canal, wrapping around both the urethra and the vagina (Gross, 2020; O'Connell & DeLancey, 2005).

It's not surprising, given our discussion of gender and medicine, that it was a woman urologist who finally took the time to excavate the true nature of the clitoris. Urology itself is one of the most male-dominated specialties in medicine. Only 9.9% of American urologists are women (Georgia Urology, 2020). There was no special, cutting-edge technology involved in O'Connell's discovery of the true shape of the clitoris. She just took the time to do careful and meticulous dissections of cadavers. She was moved to conduct her investigation because of the inequality in existing knowledge about male and female anatomy. Because of the number of prostate surgeries conducted on men, doctors had a detailed knowledge of men's pelvic anatomy, including how to avoid damaging sexual sensation and urinary function when removing a prostate. But for women, doctors knew little about the structure of the clitoris and therefore what the effects of surgery in the pelvis might be for women's sexual function. Even 15 years after this discovery, many medical textbooks still do not accurately portray the anatomy of the clitoris. The history of the clitoris is connected to a long tradition in which women's bodies are treated as medically abnormal, with potentially detrimental effects for women's health.

## Menopause in Cross-Cultural Perspective

One striking example of how women's bodies are seen as abnormal and diseased is the cultural attitudes and medical approach to menopause. Menopause is the event that marks the last menstrual cycle experienced by women and, therefore, the end of a woman's fertility, assuming that she ever was fertile (many women are not). Postmenopausal women no longer experience menstruation.

Since about the 1960s in the United States, the effects of menopause have been defined as their own disease. Menopause, a process that has occurred naturally to women who were lucky enough to survive for that long throughout our human history, began to be defined as a hormone deficiency. Menopause was conceived of as a process that deprived women of the necessary "sex hormone," estrogen, and therefore turned them into something like lifeless zombies, "walking stiffly in twos and threes, seeing little and observing less. . . . The world appears as through a grey veil, and they live as docile, harmless creatures missing most of life's values" (Fausto-Sterling, 1986, p. 110). Menstruation may make women dangerous, but according to this perspective, the end of menstruation puts women in a virtual coma-like state. The solution to what one doctor described as the "vapid cow-like negative state" (Fausto-Sterling, 1986, p. 110) of postmenopausal women was to replace the missing estrogen with hormone replacement therapy, or HRT. Many point out the happy coincidence in the fact that the doctor who first identified menopause as a problem of estrogen deficiency was also tied to a pharmaceutical company that produced estrogen in the form of the drug Premarin. By 1975, 6 million women in the United States were taking Premarin, making it the fourth- or fifth-most-popular drug in the country.

In the 1970s, research began to suggest a link between estrogen treatment and uterine cancer. Although many women and their doctors stopped using hormone replacement therapy to treat the symptoms of menopause, the controversial practice of using estrogen continued until a definitive study was released in 2002. This large-scale research project conducted by the Women's Health Institute actually terminated part of the study because of the dangers women

were being exposed to as a result of taking hormones. The study found statistically significant increased risks of breast cancer, coronary heart disease, strokes, and pulmonary emboli among women taking estrogen. Currently, hormone replacement therapy, now called hormone replacement treatment, is recommended for women only at the lowest possible dose and for the lowest possible amount of time. After the report was released in 2002, the number of women receiving HRT dropped by almost half.

What exactly was hormone replacement theory supposed to treat, and how was it supposed to work? The answers to these questions reveal some of the flaws in the kind of thinking that led to hormone replacement therapy and highlight some of the ways in which gender assumptions affect what are supposedly scientific, and therefore objective, pursuits. The symptoms probably most commonly associated with menopause, besides women turning into vapid cows, are depression, osteoporosis (weakening and loss of bone mass), hot flashes, and vaginal dryness. One study found that 75% of women reported no remarkable menopausal symptoms, which suggests that most women go through menopause experiencing none of the common symptoms listed here. Cross-culturally, one study of Navajo women found that no word exists in the Navajo language for the event we call menopause (Wright, 1982).

Although women who were more familiar with Anglo culture could discuss the symptoms and experience of menopause, women more isolated from Anglo culture did not really mark menopause in any important way, which is reflected in the lack of any word in their language to describe this "event." Many Navajo women in general were happy about the end of their menstrual cycle, as it meant a new level of freedom and opportunities open to them. Navajo women follow a set of rituals that isolate women during their menstrual cycle, and so the end of menstruation meant increased freedom and, for some women, that they could now pursue a new life as a medicine woman, which was not open to women who were still menstruating.

This research within Anglo society and among the Navajo suggests that menopause is not really a condition that calls for medical treatment among large numbers of women who *do not* experience menopause as an inconvenient or even notable event. But if we use the study that indicates that 75% of women experience no remarkable menopausal symptoms, that leaves roughly 25% of women who do. Hot flashes and vaginal dryness can be uncomfortable and annoying, while depression and osteoporosis are symptoms with potentially more serious consequences. Without hormone replacement therapy, hot flashes will eventually go away because they are a temporary effect of menopause. Vaginal dryness, for those women who experience this symptom, is a more permanent condition than hot flashes, although continued sexual activity helps, as well as the use of vaginal creams, jellies, or lubricants. These two symptoms are the only two for which hormone replacement therapy has definitively proven effective. The 2002 study of HRT found that there was a reduction in the rates of hip fracture, which is commonly associated with osteoporosis, but other studies suggest that the effects of estrogen treatment are temporary. Hormone replacement therapy works for a short while in arresting osteoporosis, but it eventually ceases to be effective. In addition, other, less risky methods of preventing osteoporosis are available.

Regarding the final symptom of menopause, depression, no research has ever established a relationship between serious depression and the onset of menopause. The bodily changes

experienced by some women during menopause may cause some women to lose sleep and be irritable, but even the assumption that menopause is a time of crisis for women can lead to depression seems to lack much support. For many women, like the Navajo women, the stage of life during which menopause is likely to occur can be a fairly positive period; assuming that women at this stage are without small children, these women are less depressed, have higher incomes, and have an increased sense of well-being on average when compared with women with small children.

If menopause is definitively linked only to the symptoms of hot flashes, vaginal dryness, and osteoporosis, all of which can be dealt with easily in the absence of hormone replacement therapy, why did Premarin become such a popular drug for so many women? How did an event that barely registers in the lives of most women come to be defined as a deficiency in need of treatment? Part of the answer is in the opportunism of the medical field and the pharmaceutical industry. In the 1940s, scientists had begun perfecting the ability to identify and purify **sex hormones** such as estrogen, and pharmaceutical companies were searching for something to do with these hormones.

One researcher argued that drug companies turned to women and menopause because they were more accessible as patients than men through their gynecologists, for which there is no male equivalent. Gynecology allowed drug companies to market hormone replacement therapy easily to women (Oudshoorn, 1994). But the cultural logic of hormone replacement therapy lies in a gendered understanding of the role of hormones that dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. The idea that estrogen needs to be replaced in postmenopausal women because it is no longer being produced makes a kind of sense to scientists, doctors, and patients. Estrogen, as a sex hormone, is an important part of what gives women their sex, and to lose this hormone would certainly mean losing important parts of what it means, biologically speaking, to be female.

There are several important flaws in this line of thinking. The first is that to identify menopause as primarily about the loss of estrogen is a gross oversimplification. There are at least six hormones involved in monitoring a woman's menstrual cycle (including testosterone), and three of those hormones are different types of the broad class of hormones identified as estrogen (Fausto-Sterling, 1986). Menopause is a complex process involving not just a woman's reproductive organs but also her pituitary gland and adrenal gland. After menopause, estrogen does not disappear from a woman's body; rather, estrogen production shifts toward different types of estrogen than those present in premenopausal women. The body shifts from estrogen produced by the ovaries to estrogen produced by the adrenal glands, and this in part explains the postmenopausal evening out of the monthly ups and downs of hormone production that predominate during menstruation. Hormone replacement therapy is based on something of a flawed logic, then, in replacing estrogen—a hormone that has not technically disappeared from the postmenopausal woman's body.

The second flaw in the line of thinking represented by hormone replacement therapy is contained in the idea of sex hormones themselves. Neither male nor female sex hormones are present exclusively in the bodies of the corresponding sex. Scientists in 1932 were aware of this disturbing fact, and they had also discovered that the sex hormones they were so interested

in affected many bodily processes that had nothing to do with reproduction. Estrogen could stunt growth, produce fat deposits, increase the breakdown of the thymus gland, and decrease kidney weight (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Other tissues of the body that could be affected by sex hormones included the bones, nerves, blood, liver, and heart. Regardless of these scientific discoveries, the idea of sex hormones was codified in two conferences in the 1930s. A female sex hormone was a hormone capable of affecting the estrus of a female, or her menstrual cycle, while a male sex hormone was a hormone responsible for the expression of male secondary sex characteristics. Female sex hormones were defined in relation to reproduction, and male sex hormones were defined in relation to the expression of sex characteristics such as the size and the decorative comb of roosters.

The study of the effects of these hormones that were unrelated to either reproduction or secondary sexual characteristics was largely dropped. The belief became well established within the scientific community and eventually the public that sexual dimorphism, the existence of two distinct, discrete sex categories, was also reflected at the chemical level in our biology. The fact that sex hormones were not really about sex in the sense of being present only in male or female bodies *or* in exclusively affecting only *sexual* bodily processes was proven at the beginning of the 20th century, but the belief in sexual dimorphism shaped what happened to this scientific evidence, and thus the idea of sex hormones is still very much with us today. Strong social constructionists would point to this as another example of how our social values and belief in sexual dimorphism shape the way in which we perceive and therefore categorize biological reality. Our culture leads us to believe in two types of sex hormones—male and female—when the real picture is much more complex.

Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) argued that this is probably no coincidence; much of the research on sex hormones took place during a historical period characterized by debates about gender, class, race, and reproduction. Understanding hormones was perceived as important to understanding reproduction, and many people during the early part of the 20th century were concerned about controlling reproduction, especially among the lower classes and certain minority groups. Funding for much of the research into hormones came from the Committee for Research in Problems of Sex, an organization that included several strong supporters of the eugenics movement—which brings us to our final exploration of the body as it relates to reproduction and sexuality.

## Eugenics, Sterilization, and Population Control

"The struggle for reproductive self-determination is one of the oldest projects of humanity; one of our earliest collective attempts to alter the biological limits of our existence," wrote Linda Gordon (1976, p. 403) in her book, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*, on the history of birth control in the United States. Few issues generate as much emotion and controversy as reproductive rights. The right to have children is not covered in the Bill of Rights in the United States, although the right to found a family is covered in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It's not something you'll probably learn about in your U.S. history class, but there's a long history of attempts to control the reproduction of women and men in the United States,

continuing well into the 21st century. The collision of rights, governments, reproduction, and bodies can result in some tragic consequences, as in the instance of the eugenics movement in England and the United States.

The word *eugenics* was coined by Sir Francis Galton from Greek roots, and its etymology suggests *good race*, as in a race of people (Greer, 1984). Galton was Charles Darwin's cousin, and some of the basic ideology of the eugenics movement can be traced back to Darwin's theory of natural selection, as applied to human populations. **Eugenics** came to mean the study or practice of improving the human race through selective breeding and, sometimes, restrictive immigration policies. Eugenics developed in England in response to concerns about the overpopulation among the lower classes, while in the United States, eugenics was applied to the lower classes and racial minorities. As a science, which eugenics claimed to be, eugenics is potentially harmless enough. But eugenics became a social movement that involved large numbers of people in the United States and England, including many who were powerful enough to make the ideals of eugenics a reality.

The eugenics movement was popular in the United States in the early 20th century, supported by powerful figures such as Theodore Roosevelt and the Rockefellers. Eugenics societies in the United States sponsored "Better Baby" contests at state fairs and issued eugenic certificates of "racial purity," like the one in Photo 7.1.

Eugenics as a practice involved preventing undesirable people from reproducing while encouraging those with desirable genetic material to have more children. In its more benign

EUGENIC CERTIFICATE
THIS GUARANTEES that I have examined the sender of this card and find a perfect PHYSICAL and MENTAL BALANCE and unusually strong EUGENIC LOVE possibilities, well fitted to promote the happiness and future welfare of the race.
THE EUGENIC IDEAL
3/0-/0.
M.D.

**PHOTO 7.1** Eugenics certificate, circa 1924.

*Source:* Reprinted by permission of Yale University, Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library.

forms, this could include "Better Baby and Fitter Families" contests at state fairs sponsored by the American Eugenics Society in the 1920s. But the same group, the American Eugenics Society, also advocated using the newly developed IQ test to determine who should and should not reproduce. The eugenics movement had considerable influence in the United States and England during the beginning of the 20th century; its adherents included Charlotte Perkins Gilman, writer and feminist. John D. Rockefeller donated large amounts of money to funding the Eugenics Research Office, while Alexander Graham Bell wrote and delivered a paper on eugenics to the American Breeding Association (Greer, 1984). Margaret Sanger was a feminist and advocate of birth control in an age when most of the existing methods of birth control were illegal in the United States, but her connection to the eugenics movement demonstrates the frequent tensions that emerge around reproductive rights. This powerful group of eugenicists was able to lobby the government in support of the 1924 National Origins Act, which severely limited immigration to the United States from all countries outside northern Europe (Solinger, 2007). Racial science of the time viewed non-Nordic Europeans as inferior races, and this included Italians, the Irish, the Polish, and Russians.

Where eugenics gained influence, involuntary sterilization often became a legal practice, one most often used against women. Carrie Buck became a national story because her case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Buck was born in Virginia to a mother who had apparently been a prostitute and contracted syphilis. Buck's mother was assigned to a home for epileptics and the feeble-minded, the rough historical equivalent of an insane asylum. Buck was sent to live with a family, where she proved to be a good student and housekeeper. In 1923, she became pregnant, and upon being informed, a Virginia peace officer immediately began the process of having Carrie Buck declared feeble-minded so that she could be sent to the same home where her mother had gone. It was common during this time period for authorities to take women who had been labeled *promiscuous* and officially classify them as *morons* or as *feeble-minded*. These were legal statuses somewhat equivalent to being ruled legally insane today.

When Buck gave birth to a baby girl in the home to which she had been assigned, that baby was labeled *subnormal*, thereby implying that the parent was socially inadequate. This evidence was used to rule that Carrie Buck should be "sexually sterilized . . . and that her welfare and that of society will be promoted by her sterilization" (Solinger, 2007, p. 93). Buck's case went all the way to the Supreme Court, where that body upheld the right of a state to engage in eugenic sterilization. The famous Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes delivered an opinion In support of Buck's sterilization, saying the following:

> It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate off-spring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. . . . Three generations of imbeciles is enough. (Solinger, 2007, p. 94)

In 1918, 22 states had sterilization laws on the books, although the extent to which they were actually invoked varied.

Carrie Buck's case sounds deeply unjust to our more modern perspective, like something out of a less enlightened past. But attempts to control women's fertility through sterilization and other means persist in the United States and other parts of the world. As recently as the 1970s, doctors working with the Indian Health Service in the United States sterilized Native American women, often without their consent or knowledge. In one case, two 15-year-old girls were surgically sterilized while they were hospitalized for appendectomies (Lawrence, 2000). The racial science of eugenics developed in the United States during the early part of the 20th century and was later put to catastrophic use by the Nazis in Germany; they began their program to eradicate Jews and other undesirable races with sterilization programs. In 1974, India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, declared a state of emergency and used the opportunity of suspended democracy to engage in large-scale forced sterilizations of poor people, women and men, in her country. The widespread practice of hysterectomies in the United States reveals a similar pattern based on race and class. Working-class women and women of color are more likely to have hysterectomies, thereby rendering them sterile and incapable of reproducing (Elson, 2004).

Against this backdrop, it's not surprising that women around the world are suspicious of attempts to curb overpopulation through what has come to be known as family planning. Population growth has been perceived as a real crisis globally since the days of Malthus and his predictions about reaching the limits of the Earth's carrying capacity, or our ability to sustain ourselves within resource limits. Certainly, the rate of population growth globally continued to speed up well into the 20th century; it took 14 years (1960 to 1974) to go from 3 billion to 4 billion people, 13 years to add another billion by 1987, and only 12 years to get to 6 billion in 1999 (Bell, 2004). By 2020, the world population reached 7.8 billion, which indicates a slight slowing in global population growth. The problem is that most of that population growth will happen in less developed countries and, therefore, in places with the fewest resources available to their governments and people.

The eugenics movement on a small scale sought to limit the reproduction of poor people in the United States and England because they were labeled undesirable. Although gaining control over population growth is beneficial to a society, trying to limit the fertility of people in the global South can be perceived as having disturbing parallels to the eugenics movement. An important fact to keep in mind in this picture is that the United States represents 5% of the world's total population but consumes 25% of the world's resources. Meanwhile, the U.S. government is the largest donor to population programs around the world (Dixon-Mueller, 1993). As many population experts and environmentalists argue, perhaps population growth is less of a problem than is inequality in the worldwide distribution of resources. The important lesson is that attempts to control reproduction have gendered implications in that they are often exacted on women's bodies, but they also reverberate with other systems for distributing power nationally and globally.

## THROWING LIKE A GIRL

On one level, it seems perfectly natural to think about the connection between gender and bodies. If you subscribe to a biosocial approach to gender, it is our bodies that in part give us gender. Many social meanings are written onto the physical differences in the bodies of men and women, but in the end, some real differences between males and females are embedded in our

bodies. Of course, then, bodies are important to the study of gender. On another level, leaving aside the assumed biological differences between women and men, the ways in which gender becomes ingrained in our bodies are amazing and sometimes disturbing.

How many times have you heard someone use the expression "throwing like a girl"? To tell someone, regardless of their gender, that they throw like a girl is not a compliment. In translation, to throw like a girl means that you don't really know how to throw, and in this sense, the phrase represents one of the central ethics of male sports and masculinity in general. Whatever you do, don't do it the way a girl would do it—"No Sissy Stuff," in other words. There's a distinct component of sexism in the phrase, but there is also an observable difference in the throwing styles of many people, and they sometimes do seem to run along gendered lines. What's going on here? Why do many women and men seem to throw differently?

Bodies seem to be the best place to look, and many people might guess that there's actually something different about the bodily structure of men and women. Something about the structure of their shoulders or the rotator cuff. But they'd be wrong. Men and women have the exact same anatomy in their shoulders and arms. From there, those who are wedded to the idea of biological explanations might turn to sex hormones or differences in strength or muscle mass. But it's a stretch to argue that any hormones could have such an effect, and the fact is, some men "throw like girls" and some women do not. Female softball players use the same throwing action on the field as do male baseball players. If you ask a man with a correct throwing motion to throw with his other hand (assuming he's not ambidextrous), chances are he'll "throw like a girl." Actor John Goodman, who is right handed and played baseball in his youth, had to learn how to throw left handed for his role as Babe Ruth in a movie. Goodman found he had to teach himself all over again how to throw left handed, and in the beginning, his left-handed throw was nothing to brag about (Fallows, 1996).

So why do so many girls and women throw in a very different style than so many boys and men? The answer lies in the way that, leaving aside any differences rooted in our biology, gender deeply shapes our bodies and, in this case, the way we move. Girls are far less likely to be taught by someone how to throw, and they are far less likely to be motivated to figure out an athletic throwing motion on their own. In addition, some have suggested that the motion of athletic throwing runs counter to the very ways in which women are taught to move their bodies. Women take up less space when sitting. When they walk, they take shorter steps, and their steps are closer together, as if they were walking a tightrope, while men's steps are generally farther apart. The subtle differences in the way women and men move are part of what allow us to make gender attributions, that is, to make guesses about who is male and who is female, and this is why many male-to-female trans women take classes from dance instructors to learn how to move like a woman. Given all these ways in which our every move is gendered, is it really surprising that when we engage in the simple act of picking something up to throw it, gender is there?

Throwing is just one of the ways in which gender mediates the relationships we have to our bodies. As we have discussed, gender impacts the things we can do with our bodies (like throwing a ball or walking down a street without causing fear). It dictates the way we feel about our bodies, through body image and the beauty myth. Gender influences the ways in which we care for our bodies, as in the relationship between masculinity and health. And gender often dictates

the amount of control we have over what is done to our bodies, as in the case of hysterectomies and other reproductive rights. In all of these ways, our bodies become an important site for the complexities of living gender in our everyday lives.

## BIG QUESTIONS

- At the beginning of this chapter, we suggested that strong social constructionists view the body as a blank screen onto which societies project their ideas about gender. Do you agree with this perspective? What evidence might you use to contest this point of view?
- Many feminists argue that the mind–body dualism is a key feature of gender inequality and that dismantling gender inequality would have to involve rethinking this division. Based on what you've read in this chapter, do you agree that the mind–body dualism is key to understanding gender inequality? How would society be different without this particular way of thinking about bodies and gender?
- The mind–body dualism is generally constructed with women positioned as representing the body and men positioned as representing the mind. Can you think of evidence that contradicts this gendered take on the mind–body dualism? Are there ways in which men might be positioned as closer to their bodies than women?
- In Chapter 2, we discussed the doing-gender approach and the resources available to help us accomplish an accountable performance of gender. In this chapter, what are ways in which the body is a resource for doing gender?
- Many of the topics in this chapter have in common a concern with how people with different amounts of power in society have more or less control over what happens to their bodies. Based on what you've read, does gender affect how much control people have over their bodies? Do other categories such as social class, race, and nationality?
- In Chapter 5, we discussed the complex relationship between gender and sexuality. How is the gender of sexuality connected to the gender of the body? How does the mind–body dualism discussed in this chapter line up with our discussion of feminine and masculine sexuality in Chapter 5?
- In this chapter, we suggested that controlling bodies in various ways (through body image, reproduction, or health) is a way of maintaining power over people in general. Do you believe bodies are an important way of maintaining power in society? Can you think of other examples in which this is true?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. If you belong to a local gym or sports club or have access to a place where people play sports or exercise, do some observation, paying close attention to the gendered nature of physical activity. Are there spaces in your location that are more masculine, feminine,

or gender neutral? What's the gender makeup of people engaged in different types of activities in these locations? Does the orientation of women and men to these activities appear to be different? What are similarities you observe in the behavior of men and women in these settings? How do your observations connect to the discussion of body image in this chapter?

2. Visit a local art museum or art gallery and pay attention to the gender story being told in the works of art. What is the predominant gender of the artists themselves? What is the gender breakdown of the people depicted in paintings, photographs, and sculptures? Are any of these depictions genderless, and what does that look like? What are some differences in how women and men are portrayed in these images? Do there appear to be differences in the way men and women are portrayed based on the gender of the artist? How do your observations line up with the gender of bodies as discussed in this chapter?

3. Investigate the gender of current products designed to help people alter their bodies in some way. You might begin by making a list of all the products that fall into this category (if you're creative, this could be a fairly long list). Then think about which of these products seem to be aimed primarily at men, which at women, and which at both sexes. Look at the advertisements for these products in magazines, in television ads, or on the Internet. What gender messages are being sent in these advertisements? What does your investigation suggest about men's and women's feelings about their bodies?

4. What is the current medical and cultural ideology surrounding menstruation and menopause? Find books, magazine articles, advice columns, or websites that are targeted toward women and address menstruation and menopause. Do these sources seem to treat menstruation and menopause as problems or disorders? Look for alternative health advice on these topics. Is the approach to menstruation and menopause different for these different sources?

5. Many cultures, like the Navajo discussed in this chapter, have menstruation taboos, dictating behaviors women can and cannot engage in when menstruating. Use online resources and your library to do some research on how different cultures think about menstruation and the norms they have regarding this biological process. How do these practices compare with those in your own culture?

6. Interview or survey women and men on their feelings about their bodies. You might focus on issues of body image, behaviors they engage in to alter their bodies, or their perspectives on the mind–body dualism. Are there gender similarities in how men and women answer these questions? Are there gender differences? How do other identities such as age, race, social class, and nationality matter?

7. Investigate the status of access to gender-affirming care for transgender youth where you live. What are the laws about gender-affirming care? Are there doctors who are supportive of gender-affirming care for transgender kids? How far would families have to travel to access that care?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**Mirror Mirror**

Website providing education and support for those suffering from eating disorders.

www.mirror-mirror.org

**The Body Positive**

Organization focusing on resources and training for body positivity.

www.thebodypositive.org

**National Women's Health Network**

Advocacy group that works to improve "the health of all women by developing and promoting a critical analysis of health issues in order to affect policy and support consumer decision-making."

www.nwhn.org

**Center for American Progress Fact Sheet: Health Disparities by Race and Ethnicity**

Information on racial health disparities.

https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/12/pdf/disparities_factsheet.pdf

## KEY TERMS

Be a Sturdy Oak
Beauty myth
Bodily autonomy
Body image
Body positivity movement
Commodify
Embodiment
Eugenics
Female circumcision
Give 'em Hell
Mind–body dualism
Neurodiversity
No Sissy Stuff
Sex hormones

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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PART III

# HOW IS GENDER AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE WAY OUR SOCIETY WORKS?

# 8 HOW DOES GENDER IMPACT THE PEOPLE WE LIVE OUR LIVES WITH?

## The Gender of Marriage and Families

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **8.1** Define social institutions and explain why they are difficult to change.
- **8.2** Summarize some purposes of marriage throughout history.
- **8.3** Understand demographic trends that show how gender impacts the institution of marriage.
- **8.4** Explain how the gendered division of labor impacts marriage.
- **8.5** Describe the doctrine of separate spheres as it relates to marriage.
- **8.6** Identify some modern challenges to traditional ideas about the household division of labor.
- **8.7** Contrast nuclear and postmodern families.

What kind of family did you grow up in? How was gender a part of the family in which you grew up? Do you think your family followed the gender norms for family life pretty closely? What did your family teach you about gender, and how much of what you believe and know about gender comes from your family? Did your family challenge gender norms or mostly accept them?

What would a genderless family look like? What makes a "good" marriage and a "bad" marriage, and how might gender be an important part of that answer? How have marriage and families changed over time, and how have those changes impacted the way we think about gender? How have the many transformations in our ways of thinking about gender impacted the institution of marriage? How do marriage and families become important sites for the acting out of our gender identities, and does marriage have to involve gender in order to work?

These are all questions we explore in this chapter on marriage and families, two institutions both intimately familiar and, as we will explore, inherently strange and alien.

In many places around the world, gender is deeply influenced by the institutions of marriage and family. From the theoretical perspective of an institutional approach to gender, it is institutions such as marriage and the family that produce gender, and without these institutions, gender as we know it does not exist. Would it even be possible for us to talk about gender

in the same way without such things as marriage and families? The history of these two institutions, as we have already seen throughout this book, is deeply interwoven with the history of gender. And if you want to be able to tell something about the way gender works in a particular culture, looking at the ways in which it structures marriage and families is a good place to start.

## SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

**Social institutions** are patterned behaviors that provide a guide for accomplishing something in society. Marriage is generally, but not always, seen as the first step to starting a family. It's also part of how you demonstrate adulthood in many cultures. Marriage is a signal of commitment to another person. In the past, marriage was a way to seal alliances and end wars. In other times and places, marriage was best viewed as a kind of business merger—a pooling of resources. That's just a partial list of the important tasks in society that marriage helps us accomplish.

Social institutions are powerful entities in any society. You don't have to follow the set of instructions laid out for you by an institution like marriage, but if you don't, there are likely to be consequences. One aspect of social institutions is that they provide their own justification. You don't have to explain to someone why you're getting married, and you probably don't have to explain why marriage is important. A useful way to think of social institutions is that they are like pathways through our social world that get laid down over time. They might begin as a game trail, evolve into a dirt path, and end up as a paved, four-lane interstate. You don't have to get on the interstate, but life is a lot easier if you do.

Because of the power located in social institutions like marriage, they're not easy to change. When people suggest changes to marriage, there's likely to be a lot of passionate debate and disagreement as well as general uneasiness. We'll explore how in the past, the emergence of modern marriage, or companionate marriage, made a lot of people nervous. More recently, the widespread legalization of same-sex marriage has caused ripples of unease along with excitement and joy. As of this writing, same-sex marriage is legal in 32 countries (Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Uruguay.) (Human Rights Campaign, 2022).). Some who oppose same-sex marriage argue that to allow it undermines the fundamental basis of marriage—a union between a woman and a man. A marriage between two women, they might argue, isn't marriage at all.

Certainly, the continued trend toward legalization of same-sex marriage will have effects on this institution, even though same-sex marriage itself is really nothing new. Even before LGBTQ+ movements began to advocate the legalization of same-sex marriage, there were many instances of same-sex marriage across cultures and time periods. Sixteenth-century French king Henry III was rumored to have sexual and romantic relationships with his mignons, or young male favorites, to the extent that some satirists accused the king and his mignons of engaging in secret marriages with each other. Queen Elizabeth I in England suggested to Phillip that she might marry his sister instead of him and that in that marriage, Elizabeth would be the

"husband" as the more powerful partner in the pair. There are many accounts of women who passed as men taking wives. In some cases, the wives may not have known, but in at least one instance, two women agreed that one of them would cross-dress as a man to allow them to marry (Ferguson, 2016).

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MARRIAGE

What can we say is always true about marriage? Surely, it always involves love, right? Love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage, or so the song goes. Are love and marriage really inextricable? The idea of finding love in marriage is only about 200 years old in Anglo-European cultures. You might think of the pairing of love and marriage as a recent historical experiment. Later in the chapter, we'll explore our sense of exactly how this experiment has worked out so far. For many people across history, marriages were more likely to be about political power than about love. Marriage involved political intrigue, murder, family feuds, and incest to an extent that led Stephanie Coontz (2005), in her history of marriage, to compare these stories to real-life soap operas, with sometimes large-scale consequences.

### Antony and Cleopatra: The Real Story

The story of Cleopatra and Marc Antony is a good example of marriage in historical perspective. Billed as a classic love story, the real tale has much more to do with the politics of Egypt and Rome than with passion or lust. During this particular period in the long history of marriage, marriage had become a system for gaining power or forging alliances among the elite groups in a society. Daughters and sisters were used in these power exchanges, and they often came out on the losing end of these deals. Women were sent far away from their homes to marry men they had never met.

The story of Antony and Cleopatra has been romanticized in cultural depictions as one of the great love stories of all time. That's one version of the story, but the reality—as far as historians and classicists understand it—is a bit more complicated. Cleopatra was the daughter of the Egyptian emperor, and when he died, he designated Cleopatra, then 17, and her 10-year-old brother, Ptolemy XIII, as co-heirs and left instructions for them to marry. Having his children marry each other, the Egyptian emperor hoped, would rule out the possibility of a power struggle between various sets of Cleopatra's and Ptolemy's in-laws.

But his children did not marry, and instead, they went to war for sole control of Egypt. Cleopatra was a smart woman, well versed in several languages, and when Julius Caesar, then ruler of Rome, came to try to broker a peace deal between her and her brother, she understood the value of an alliance with Rome. The primary way to forge alliances in those days was through marriage or children, and whether the affair also involved love or passion is less important than the fact that Cleopatra and Julius Caesar had an affair and that she bore him a child, Caesarion.

Several marriages later, Cleopatra and her son became involved in the affairs of Rome as a result of the threat that Caesarion posed to the unstable rule of Octavian, the adopted son of

Julius Caesar. Cleopatra was a powerful woman in charge of a large army, and Marc Antony was involved in a power struggle with Octavian for control of the whole of the Roman Empire. Antony was looking for an ally in this struggle, and although the two may have had genuine affection or passion for each other, the relationship was helped along a great deal by the mutual benefits to each of an alliance.

Marriage, as this story demonstrates, was the historical equivalent of the peace treaty, nonaggression pact, or trade agreement. The exchange, usually of women, sealed the deal and sometimes literally took the form of a sister for a sister or a daughter for a daughter. Some women, like Cleopatra, used this power to become the ruler themselves rather than the mere currency of exchange. During the Christian era of the Roman Empire, the emperor's sister, Pulcheria, was able to gain control of the Roman Empire and rule partly by declaring herself a sacred virgin, foreshadowing the strategy used by Queen Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen, in England. Elizabeth proposed marrying Phillip of Spain's sister, as discussed earlier, not because she was in love with her but because she understood the importance of forming an alliance through marriage with Spain, even if it involved marrying another woman.

Although women were more often the method of exchange in these power systems, men also attempted to use marriage to gain power for themselves. The marriage gradient worked somewhat differently in these time periods. The **marriage gradient** is a pattern in which women tend to "marry up" while men "marry down" in mate selection, meaning that women usually marry men who are older, richer, and generally of higher status. In these royal intrigues, men were often motivated to marry up to gain the power and wealth of their wife's family. In China, a low-level scholar with exceptional talents might be given a wife from a noble family in the hopes that he would rise through the ranks and that this alliance would eventually benefit the noble family.

## So What Is Marriage, Then?

These historical accounts demonstrate that marriage, regardless of your gender, was a means to gain power and resources rather than a joining of soul mates. Given the many variations in how different societies define marriage, it's difficult to come up with a standard definition of marriage that actually covers all the forms this institution takes around the world (DeCoker, 2001). The way we think of marriage in the United States is still different from how it's understood in other parts of the world. The legalization of gay and lesbian marriages at the federal level in the United States in 2015 demonstrates the ways in which the shape of marriage as an institution continues to change. Most of the things we now assume to be true about marriage in places like the United States have been true only for roughly the past 150 years, and they are still not true in all parts of the world.

You might think about the **companionate marriage**—the expectation that spouses experience romantic and sexual attraction to each other—as a fairly recent experiment. That's important to keep in mind when we begin to discuss the most recent conversations about the decline or end of marriage. When many people bemoan the coming death of marriage as an institution, they may be right. A social institution is something that gives us a set of clear-cut rules about how to go about accomplishing something in society. One problem we'll explore is that marriage and

families in recent years have become less institutionalized and more like something we make up as we go along than a set of established rules to follow. This shift has its own set of advantages and disadvantages, and it has interesting implications where gender is concerned.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 8.1
### I LOVE YOU, BUT I DON'T WANT TO LIVE WITH YOU—LIVING APART TOGETHER

Married couples who didn't live with each other in the past often did so as a matter of necessity rather than as a matter of choice. Increasingly, some couples in contemporary Anglo-European societies are not living together after marriage or in long-term committed relationships as a matter of choice. Demographers have labeled this new trend living apart together (LAT), and those who choose to follow this trend are called LATs (Bennett, 2007; Newman, 2007). According to 2006 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 3.8 million married couples do not live under the same roof (Newman, 2007). In Great Britain, demographers estimate that 2 million couples, despite being in a committed relationship, do not live together, while in Sweden, the number of LATs rose from 6% of the population in 1993 to 14% in 2002 (Bennett, 2007). Sasha Roseneil, a professor of sociology and gender studies, found through interviews with LATs in Great Britain that most had made a conscious decision to maintain separate domestic lives. Their reasons for not living together included the breakdown of a previous cohabiting relationship and a reluctance to impose a new partner on children from a previous relationship. A few LATs in Roseneil's study were "regretfully apart," as a result of work or family responsibilities, while a third of the group were "undecidedly apart," finding themselves in relationships that were committed but that weren't necessarily leading to cohabitation (see Bennett, 2007). In her personal account of LAT life, Judith Newman cited the expense of finding a living space large enough for both of their households in New York City (including her husband's multiple pianos) as well as the fact that she and her husband had little in common beyond loving each other and their children, a fact that might make living together difficult (see Bennett, 2007). Is the LAT lifestyle the wave of the future, or is it just a fad involving artistic, Hollywood types? What does this phenomenon do to attempts to define what marriage is, and what does it suggest about how marriage is changing?

## THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF MARRIAGE

Defining marriage is a difficult task to undertake, but if we narrow our focus to the assumptions about what marriage is and how it works within particular time periods and particular cultures, then we can begin to understand the ways in which gender has important impacts on the institution of marriage. For cultures that, by and large, assume marriage is an institution involving one man and one woman, demographics can have an interesting part to play. **Demographics** are a way to describe the basic population characteristics of a group, including the age distribution, the sex ratio, how long people live, the composition of different racial and ethnic groups, and so on. In discussing the average life expectancies among men and women in Chapter 7, we were discussing demographics.

## All the Single Ladies

One of the most interesting demographic trends related to marriage in the United States recently has to do with its absence. As Rebecca Traister (2016) documents in her book *All the Single Ladies*, women in the United States are living through what the Population Reference Bureau has described as a "dramatic reversal" in marriage trends. Traister states that "for the first time in American history, single women (including those who were never married, widowed, divorced, or separated) outnumbered married women" (p. 5). The average age at first marriage among American women, which has hovered from 20 to 22 since the 19th century, has climbed to 28 (Population Reference Bureau, 2021). Only 20% of Americans as a group are wed by the age of 29, compared to 60% in 1960. The proportion of young adults who have never been married is now larger than the percentage that have married. Unmarried women specifically make up over a quarter of the voting-eligible population in the United States. Statistically, at least, it's now normal as a woman to be unmarried in the United States.

What are the implications of this trend, and what does it reveal about the gendered nature of marriage as an institution? Traister (2016) traces the roots of this trend back to the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States. Not all feminists of the second wave were critical of marriage; Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique*, was more interested in fixing marriage than in encouraging women to abstain from it. Other feminists like Andrea Dworkin were more vehement in their condemnation of marriage. Dworkin famously said that "marriage as an institution developed from rape as a practice" (Traister, 2016, p. 23).

Regardless of different feminists' positions on marriage, the real legal gains of the second wave made it easier for women to delay or abstain from marriage. In 1972, the Supreme Court ruled in *Eisenstadt v. Baird* that contraception could be sold to single women, affirming the right of the individual, married or single, to make decisions about her or his body (Traister, 2016). Though a Supreme Court ruling that upholds the rights of single people may not seem important by today's standards, it was a revolutionary ruling in a time when to get married for women meant giving up many of their liberties. Justice William Brennan articulated the predominant assumptions of the time in his ruling when he said, "The marital couple is not an independent entity with a mind and heart of its own but an association of two individuals each with a separate intellectual and emotional make-up" (Traister, 2016, p. 27). The ruling recognized that women's rights should not be curtailed based on their marital status, a fairly radical idea for the time.

A cascade of legislative and judicial changes followed, including *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which legalized abortion. In 1974, Congress passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, making it easier for women to secure credit cards, bank loans, and mortgages without the permission or assistance of their husbands. The 1980s saw a concerted backlash against single women. Conservatives like Ronald Reagan and Dan Quayle argued that one of the main causes of poverty was not structural changes to the economy but poor women's stubborn refusal to marry. Though they might single out upper-class white women like the fictional TV character Murphy Brown, the real target of their anger was poor and predominantly minority women. This backlash saw the origins of the "welfare queen" and its presumption that our country's problems

could be laid at the feet of unmarried Black women who had upset the correct balance by having children (and too many of them) out of wedlock.

Despite this backlash, by the 1990s, the great crossover in women's marriage patterns was firmly in place, and now the decision to abstain or delay marriage is no longer seen as a political choice; it's just the way things are. Single women have become a powerful demographic. Across racial groups, unmarried women drove turnout in the 2012 presidential election. Single women made up almost 40% of the African American population voting in the election, close to 30% of the Latino population, and about a third of all young voters (Traister, 2016). Single women helped elect Barack Obama, and both Republicans and Democrats have stepped up their efforts to win the single-woman vote. In the midterm elections in Virginia in 2017, unmarried women turned out in unprecedented numbers and helped give Democrat Ralph Northam a decisive victory in the gubernatorial election (The Voter Participation Center, 2018).

The demographic increase in the number of single women doesn't signal the end of marriage; demographers predict that most Americans (80%) will still marry at some point in their lives (Traister, 2016). But there are significant implications for marriage as an institution and society as a whole when women enter marriage later. Evidence suggests that waiting to walk down the aisle is good for marriage as an institution. States in which couples marry less frequently and at later ages also have some of the lowest divorce rates in the United States.

When women marry later, men and women have more opportunities to interact with each other in diverse settings outside the married state. Men become accustomed to seeing women as colleagues and bosses rather than just wives or potential wives. When marriage is delayed, both women and men become more independent, increasing the possibility that they enter marriage with more parity. Women who marry later enter the partnership with their own bank accounts, careers, and social circles. Both husband and wife are likely to know how to do the laundry and use an electric drill. In other words, when women delay marriage, they may be more empowered within that relationship than younger women who marry.

Table 8.1 includes some key demographic information about unmarried women in the United States.

As early as the 19th century, suffragist Susan B. Anthony suggested that women as a group would reach their full potential only after an "epoch of single women" (Traister, 2016, p. 40). Anthony prophesized that the path toward gender equality would necessitate a period in which women stopped marrying. "In woman's transition from the position of subject to sovereign, there must needs be an era of self-sustained, self-supported homes," Anthony said in an 1877 speech called "The Homes of Single Women."

Traister suggests that we are currently living in that "epoch of single women." The fear and scapegoating of single women that occurred during the 1980s hasn't completely disappeared. This generation of conservatives continues to suggest that women who don't marry are selfish or pathological. Presidential candidate Marco Rubio, echoing Reagan and Quayle, said, "The greatest tool to lift children and families from poverty . . . isn't a government spending program. It's called marriage" (Traister, 2016, p. 34). Other conservative commentators worry that women's ability to devote more of their lives to areas beyond a husband and children is damaging the very power and health of the United States as a nation.

**TABLE 8.1 ■ Demographics of Unmarried Women, 2017**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Race of Unmarried Women: 4 in 10 Unmarried Women Are Women of Color** | |
| White, non-Hispanic | 61.70% |
| African American, non-Hispanic | 18.40% |
| Hispanic/Latina | 13.10% |
| Asian American/Pacific Islander | 3.70% |
| Other | 3.10% |
| **Age of Unmarried Women: Median Age of Unmarried Women Is 45** | |
| Ages 18–29 | 32.30% |
| Ages 30–49 | 24.20% |
| Ages 50–64 | 19.80% |
| Age 65 and over | 23.80% |
| **Marital Status of Unmarried Women: Half of All Unmarried Women Are Widowed, Divorced, or Separated** | |
| Never married | 52.50% |
| Divorced | 24.10% |
| Widowed | 19.20% |
| Separated from partner | 4.20% |
| **Income of Unmarried Women** | |
| 0–$9,999 | 8.10% |
| $10,000–$24,999 | 18.60% |
| $25,000–$49,999 | 24.10% |
| $50,000–$74,999 | 16.70% |
| $75,000+ | 32.50% |

*Source:* The Voter Participation Center. (2018). Unmarried women in America: Cornerstone of our democracy. https://www.voterparticipation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/VPC-Unmarried-Women-in-America-2018.pdf.

Traister argues that these changes in marriage patterns might make our country better rather than signaling its death knell. In addition, she suggests that the seeming flight from marriage by heterosexuals at the same time the LGBTQ+ community moves toward matrimony is no coincidence. Both movements are part of a larger project:

> a dismantling of the institution as it once existed—as a rigidly patrolled means by which one sex could exert legal, economic, and sexual power over another—and a reimagining of it as a flexible union to be entered, ideally, on equal terms. (Traister, 2016, p. 30)

## The Marriage Squeeze

There are important implications for gender and gender equality when women abstain from or delay marriage. Focusing on heterosexual marriages, gender also affects who might be available when women and men do marry. Demographics tell us the relative mixture of women and men within a given population. The **sex ratio** is usually expressed as the number of males to females in a given society, so worldwide, a sex ratio of 1.01 means that there are 101 men for every 100 women (Tong, 2022). The sex ratio varies by age group; when you look at the population worldwide older than age 65, there are now 80 men for every 100 women.

The sex ratio becomes important to heterosexual marriage in a society in which women marry mostly men, because there needs to be enough of each group available to marry each other. Too few women or too few men produces a **marriage squeeze**, or a shortage of one sex or the other in the age group in which marriage generally occurs (Guttentag & Secord, 1983). Marriage becomes like a game of musical chairs, and in that there are too few partners available to pair off with, someone is going to be left standing without a chair at the end.

Demographers are predicting that China is on the cusp of a serious marriage squeeze due to its male-biased sex ratio at birth (SRB). Since the 1980s, the SRB has increased sharply there due to son preference, selective abortion of girls, and low fertility in general (Jin et al., 2013). In 2010, the SRB was 118 (meaning that there are 118 men for every 100 women), and demographers estimate the number of "excess" males under age 20 to be 33 million, many of whom will fail to marry in the next 20 years. This marriage squeeze is especially problematic in a culture in which marriage is a nearly universal expectation; the marriage rate for Chinese women and men who reach their 30s is 95%. Demographers in China and around the world are concerned about the effects of this marriage squeeze and predict that those effects might range from expansion of the sex industry and the spread of HIV-AIDS to an increase in crime and antisocial behavior (Jin et al., 2013).

The potential for a marriage squeeze is also affected by the marriage gradient we discussed earlier, and this is where gender becomes important. In a group of women and men ages 20 to 29, not just any man will marry just any woman. If the current marriage gradient dictates that women should marry up while men marry down, then a marriage squeeze can exist even with a one-to-one sex ratio among men and women within a particular age group. This is because men generally marry women who are younger than they while women generally marry men who are older. A marriage squeeze can also be created by too many men with lower educational attainment relative to women in the same group or too many women making more money relative to the same group of men.

The term *marriage squeeze* was first coined by demographers in the United States in the wake of the post–World War II baby boom to describe the problem faced by women during this period (Glick, 1988). Remember that women marry up in terms of age, so the first wave of baby boom women had as their marriage pool a group of men who had been born before them and, therefore, before the advent of the baby boom. The sex ratio among boomers themselves was fine, but for the women of this generation, there were fewer older, marriageable men. This may have helped along the reemergence of the women's movement in the 1960s; the marriage squeeze may have led to more unmarried women who pursued education and careers. The discrimination they faced in colleges, universities, and the workplace may have helped to develop some of the ideology that became part of the second wave of the feminist movement.

## THINK ABOUT IT

How do the concepts of a marriage gradient and a marriage squeeze connect to ideas of compulsory heterosexuality?

The marriage gradient and a marriage squeeze can have some interesting and fairly significant impacts on a society. A country that lacks an adequate supply of women or men may experience an out-migration of one sex or the other. This partly explains trends in Irish immigration to the United States during the 18th century, which included many single Irish women. These women came to the United States and often worked as maids because economic conditions in Ireland made finding a marriageable man difficult. A marriage squeeze can also cause a group to reconsider exactly who is and who isn't marriageable. Throughout this discussion, we've used the somewhat ambiguous terminology of the sex ratio within a particular group. That group can be a whole country, but often, even within those boundaries, some groups are considered more or less marriageable.

### Globalization and the Marriage Squeeze

Hung Cam Thai's (2004) research demonstrated the specific effects of globalization on the marriage gradient among Vietnamese both in Vietnam and in the diaspora. A **diaspora** refers to the worldwide scattering of a nationality or ethnic group. When we refer to the Vietnamese diaspora, we mean all the Vietnamese living in Vietnam as well as the many emigrants living in the United States, Canada, France, and Australia, to name just a few of the more common destinations for Vietnamese emigrants.

The Vietnamese face what Thai identified as a double marriage squeeze. Within Vietnam itself, there are more women relative to men as a result of the high male mortality rate during the Vietnam War and the high numbers of Vietnamese men who migrated after the war. Because of the higher rates of male migration, there are more men relative to women outside Vietnam in places like the United States and Australia. In Vietnam, among those ages 30 to 34, there are 92 men for every 100 women. In the United States, among Vietnamese Americans ages 25 to 29, there are 129 men for every 100 women. Too many women in Vietnam and too many men outside Vietnam is a problem that, in our era of globalization, seems to have an easy solution—move the people around. After all, this large-scale global movement of people is a significant part of what globalization is all about.

### Transnational Marriage

Yet we still need to keep in mind the marriage gradient, one way in which gender reasserts itself into the equation in a tangible way. In an era of globalization, what exactly does it mean to marry up and marry down? In her interviews with couples involved in **transnational marriages**, Thai (2004) found that the marriage gradient was still an important ideal to both the women

in Vietnam looking for husbands and the men in the United States and Canada searching for wives. To outline the complexities faced by these women and men, she focused on the specific case of Minh and Thanh. Thanh was a 32-year-old single lawyer in Vietnam whose education and age made her marriage prospects more complex. As she described her situation, men in Vietnam with levels of education and wealth similar to her own wanted to marry down, which meant marrying a woman considerably younger than Thanh. This made it difficult for her to marry up within Vietnam, although she described the alternative, marrying a man with less education or who made less money than her, as "very unappealing" (Thai, 2004, p. 279).

In addition, Thanh believed that any Vietnamese man, although especially one of lower social status than herself, would want to follow traditional gender norms about Vietnamese marriage by trying to control her emotionally or dominating her physically. For Thanh, marrying a Vietnamese man who migrated to the United States was marrying up, first, because he lived in the United States, and second, because an American husband, having been influenced by American values, would be less invested in the gender norms of traditional Vietnamese marriage. Thanh and women like her assumed that the standard of living for Vietnamese in the United States was far better than their own in Vietnam and that the more egalitarian gender norms of American culture would have become part of the value system of Vietnamese American men.

The problem Thai (2004) identified in her research was that both of these assumptions on the part of Vietnamese women about their counterparts in the United States were likely to be misguided. Thanh, like the members of many wealthy and successful families in Vietnam, was able to achieve that level of prosperity in large part through the system of remittances. **Remittances** are the money and income immigrants send back to their families in their country of origin. A Vietnamese immigrant in the United States like Minh may not earn a lot of money by American standards, but the money he sends back to his relatives in Vietnam can considerably raise their standard of living. Thanh's family reaped the benefits of remittances by an uncle in the United States, and Minh remitted $500 of his $1,400 monthly paycheck to his family in Vietnam.

This system partly explains the often reduced standard of living of immigrants like Minh relative to their families back in their native country. Five hundred U.S. dollars can buy much more in Vietnam than it does in the Seattle suburb where Minh worked as a deep fryer and assistant cook at a Chinese restaurant. Low-paying jobs are the other part of the picture explaining how Vietnamese American men are often in worse shape than their families back in Vietnam; Minh had completed 3 years of engineering school in Vietnam before he emigrated to the United States, but without knowing English, there was no way for him to translate these skills into a high-paying, high-status job in the United States.

Like many immigrants, Minh experienced a considerable drop in his social status in his move from Vietnam to the United States, although his family back in Vietnam benefitted greatly. Many Vietnamese American men are not, in fact, economically better off than their female counterparts in Vietnam. In addition, their loss of status in the destination country makes preserving their control within marriage even more important than it might be to a man in Vietnam. As Minh said about his life in the United States, "If you have money, everyone

will pay attention [to you], but if you don't, you have to live by yourself" (Thai, 2004, p. 281). Vietnamese American men like Minh look for wives in Vietnam because they want a woman who will show them the amount of respect assumed to be normal in traditional Vietnamese marriages. This respect is important because they do not receive it in their everyday lives as immigrants in the United States. They also notice that showing respect and deference to husbands is not the norm among many marriages in the United States. Men like Minh are seeking from their Vietnamese wives exactly the kinds of things that Thanh was expecting to escape by marrying a Vietnamese American man.

In this situation, marrying up comes to have a strange meaning. As Thai (2004) described this couple, Minh spent the bulk of his life working in the service industry in a small Chinese restaurant in suburban Middle America. He hadn't read a book in recent memory, lived with his fellow Vietnamese restaurant workers in a modest three-bedroom apartment, and counted among his possessions a used Toyota Tercel. Thanh, on the other hand, was a successful lawyer who lived in urban Saigon, used Chanel perfume, and wore Ann Taylor shirts. Thanh was more comfortable speaking English than Vietnamese, while Minh used Vietnamese in his interview with Thai. Thanh counted *The Great Gatsby* as one of her favorite books, took aerobic classes, and wore her hair dyed and permed. The social divide between the worlds of these two people was great, and not at all in the direction you would expect given the assumptions many people make about the global North of the United States as compared with the developing world of Vietnam.

The expectations each brought to their marriage were almost completely at odds, and yet both interpreted their pairing as following a marriage gradient and as a completely logical solution to the double marriage squeeze. What will happen when Minh and Thanh actually enter married life? Thai presented several possibilities, including a happy or an unhappy adaptation on the part of either half of the couple. Perhaps Minh might be persuaded to give up his ideas of having control in his marriage, or perhaps Thanh will be content with a more traditional Vietnamese marriage. Marital conflict is likely in either case, and perhaps many of these marriages will end in divorce or, worse, physical or emotional abuse. Thanh and Minh's story demonstrates both the ways in which the basic idea of the marriage gradient can become flexibly defined in different social contexts and the ways in which gender norms in the form of the marriage gradient can make the actual business of being married a fairly difficult prospect.

Which leaves us with a question that may have occurred to you already: If the marriage gradient often becomes difficult to follow, as well as potentially creates the problems we discussed among transnational Vietnamese couples, why do people continue to follow it? As we saw among powerful royal families historically, there were distinct advantages to men's ability to marry up and improve their family's social status. The marriage gradient has not always been enforced or assumed in the same form we see it today. Some people do defy the marriage gradient in its current form; sometimes women marry younger men or men marry women who make more money or have more education than they do.

Why don't more people follow their lead? There are several explanations you might offer up, but all of them would have to do with the power of gender. We discussed the existing gender norms about height differences between women and men in Chapter 7, and doing-gender

theory argues that these size disparities are part of the resources women and men use to do gender cooperatively. A woman standing next to a man who is taller than she presents a simple visual message about who is in charge and who has more power.

The marriage gradient can be viewed in a similar light; when women choose men who are older, richer, or more powerful, they are reinforcing some of our basic ideas about who should be in charge—even within intimate relationships such as marriage. On an interactional level, we perform inequality in marriage through the marriage gradient. An institutional explanation might point to the **exploitation theory of marriage**, which argues that marriage evolved as a tool for the subordination of women. It then makes sense that a married woman should always be less powerful in some way than her husband. This is the main point of marriage.

Even if you don't believe that keeping women in their place is the main purpose of marriage, an institutional approach would still point to the marriage gradient as a way in which this particular institution creates a set of rules to follow that reinforce gender norms and gender inequality. It may not have ever been the main purpose of marriage, and it certainly may not be the main purpose now. Nonetheless, this is the way institutions work; rules get set up and followed, becoming beyond question regardless of what their actual consequences are. In this way, the marriage gradient demonstrates the way in which gender and marriage are intertwined even before anyone walks down the aisle.

## WHO DOES WHAT? THE GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOR

One of the most powerful ways gender enters into marriages and families is through the gendered division of labor.

A gendered division of labor is one of the oldest and most common ways of distributing tasks in a society, with age being the only other close competitor in terms of dividing up who does what. The **gendered division of labor** is simply a sense that certain tasks are more appropriate to one gender or the other. Brewing beer among medieval serfs was a woman's task, while plowing the fields was what men did. In many African societies, it is a man's job to clear fields for cultivation but a woman's responsibility to grow the crops used to feed the family (Beneria & Sen, 1997). When we talk about the gendered division of labor, we're talking about all forms of labor a family performs, regardless of whether anyone gets paid for those tasks. Caring for children is a form of labor, although it is rarely part of the paid labor market except in the form of care provided by babysitters or nannies.

The gendered division of labor is so fundamental to the structure of families that in the absence of it, things can get confusing. The increasing number of nonbinary parents struggle with basic questions, like, what will my child call me? Mother, Father, Mom, Dad—most of the names we have for parents are gendered, so what do you call a parent who is neither feminine or masculine? Writer and nonbinary parent andrea bennett describes the disorientation they feel when at times they're in public with their toddler, people refer repeatedly to them as "mom" (bennett, 2019). Because when they travel, people perceive them as feminine, they often get asked who's taking care of their child, along with comments like, "You trust him to do that?" When asked this question, bennett has to pause to catch up to the premise of the question—that

as a "mother," they cannot trust a father to take care of his own child. Even in this context in which, the question doesn't fit the actual situation, the assumptions of the gendered division of labor are revealed. Feminine people are best suited to take care of children.

In addition to the interactional work that comes with being a nonbinary parents, there are structural barriers. When bennett goes to fill out paperwork for their child's preschool application, the intake form has blank spaces only for "mother" and "father." Though their gender doesn't matter to their child, the rest of the world demands that parents be gendered.

As andrea bennett's experiences as a nonbinary parent reveal, childcare is a task that many of us would assume is associated with women, and generally, most societies do designate some group of women as primarily responsible for childcare. But the particular women who do childcare in any given society may not be the biological mothers of the children or even biologically related to the children. One survey of nonindustrial societies suggests that in 8 out of 10 such societies, children between the ages of 18 months and 5 years old have spent less than half of their time with their own mothers (Coltrane, 1996). Often, older women or older children do much of the childcare, but some research suggests that half of all societies also have close father–child relationships. For example, among the Aka pygmies in Africa, fathers sleep with their infants, feed and soothe them, and generally show them a great deal of affection, even though mothers still do the bulk of childcare (Coltrane, 1996).

The Mbuti, another African tribe, have a relatively flexible gendered division of labor. Both men and women gather food in the forest, and hunting is most often a joint activity between women and men. Women and men both make hunting nets, and both men and women help to build and maintain the huts in which they live. Husbands and wives have roughly equal amounts of say in issues affecting the family and the larger group. The role of Mbuti men in childcare is exemplified by the way in which the Mbuti wean children off breast milk and onto solid food. At a certain point, when Mbuti children are ready, their father picks them up and fondles them affectionately just as their mother would. Mbuti fathers take the child to their breast and hold him there, as a mother would to breastfeed the child. Being as familiar with his father as he is with his mother, the child begins to explore for milk, but instead, he is given his first taste of solid food. In this way, men become a "kind of mother" (Coltrane, 1996, p. 185) to Mbuti children in giving them their first solid food and playing a large role in their care.

## Transgender Families and the Division of Labor

Transgender families provide an interesting opportunity to examine the gendered division of labor. In the case of trans men and trans women, family members were at least partially socialized into a different gender identity. That is, many trans men were socialized into femininity before transitioning to a man. What does the division of labor look like in transgender families, then?

A slow trickle of studies on transgender people have begun to creep into academic journals, including Pfeffer and LaRossa's (2010) study of cis women in relationships with trans men partners. In their interviews with 50 cis women, most of whom identified as feminist (93%), they found dynamics surprisingly similar to those of cis women in relationships with cis men. That is, many of the cis women reported inegalitarian, gender-stereotyped divisions of household

labor in their partnerships. Like cisgender couples, they used certain strategies to explain the seeming disconnect between their feminist identification—which would be expected to result in a more equal division of household labor—and the unequal and gender-stereotypical reality of their actual lives. Many of these justifications drew on narratives of individual choice and personal preferences rather than on systematic and structural gender inequalities.

The cis women in Pfeffer and LaRossa's (2010) study acknowledged the unequal division of labor between themselves and their trans man partner but rationalized the reasons for this inequality. Ani stated, "I do the dishes; but I'm so neurotic about having a clean house and he is not . . . I definitely do more than he does but, again, I'm the one who happens to be a neat freak" (p. 173). Cis women used a frame of personal preferences to explain the division of household labor and often explicitly denied that gender stereotypes were involved. For example, Linda explained her and her partner's division of labor:

> I would say he's definitely more of an outdoors person than I am. Like I don't know how to drive a car, I don't have my driver's license where he's driven from a young age. He fixes the car outside. He's the one who scoops up the dog poo. He putters around in the garden. I cook a little bit more than he would though I don't think we do things like that because we feel we have to but that's just what our personal interests are. (p. 173)

Statements like these demonstrated a reluctance and sometimes refusal to link the pattern of chores performed by partners as in any way connected to larger gender structures. These "**family myths**" and "gender strategies" are similar to those identified by researchers among heterosexual, cisgender couples. Family myths and gender strategies allow partners to retain their feminist commitments to equality in the face of a family structure that largely contradicts those ideals, thereby keeping their relationships intact. Cis women's use of these strategies is similar to the explanations provided by cis women in relationships with cis men.

In addition, the researchers discovered important differences among the cis women in their study. Cis women in relationships begun before their partner's transition who considered their relationship to be "lesbian" were more likely to report performing more household labor than their trans partner. Those cis women whose relationship with their trans partner began after his transition were least likely to report doing more household labor relative to their partner.

Cis women also reported having to do emotion work in their relationship with their trans men partners. Emotion work involves the managing of not just one's own emotions but also the emotions of others. Cis women reported ways in which they had to both take care of and were expected to be accountable for the emotions of their partners. These included tasks like keeping track of appointments and generally being expected to be the one who's "on the ball." As with housework, cis women described the work they do keeping their partner's life organized as a matter of personal preference and style. In addition, cis women did emotion work trying to get their partners to communicate their emotions and adjusting their own expectations to their trans man partner's lack of communication. As Veronica explained,

> I think that we're pretty much egalitarian. I think that . . . I'm probably more of the one who gets us to talk about things. So I kind of have to be the provoker. . . . I have to be the one who gets him to say things. I kind of have to egg him on a little. I

> think that I help him to be more expressive and he helps me to calm down my brain. (Pfeffer & LaRossa, 2010, p. 175)

Veronica here describes doing emotion work consistent with stereotypical gender roles, where women are more skilled at talking about their feelings while men are more stoic.

In the division of household labor and their emotion work, cis women with trans men were similar to partnerships between cis women and cis men. Cis women in these relationships also found themselves taking on the additional work of the complex medical or health advocacy and care that went with being partnered with a trans man. Regardless of whether their partners had transitioned before or during their relationship, cis women were still affected by a broad range of transition-related support. This is partly because for many transgender people, "transitioning" is less of a time-limited event than it is an ongoing lifelong process. For trans men who have gender-confirming surgery, this doesn't put an end to the hostility and indifference they may experience from the medical community. Their partners become advocates, mediators, and emotional supporters. Samantha described her role in her partner's encounter with an inept medical practitioner:

> [His] doctor was a recommendation from his pediatrician. . . . She sort of blew off his gender, . . . didn't acknowledge it. As soon as he told her that he was trans, she wouldn't look him in the eye and he just felt like she rushed through his exam and did everything she could not to be around him. So he came out of it crying. He was really upset. . . . I'm very proactive . . . and so I was ready to call the office and speak to somebody about it and educate them on their trans issues. . . . But he was like, "No, no it's okay, it's okay." . . . He was really depressed. . . . He was suicidal. (Pfeffer & LaRossa, 2010, p. 175)

Cis women like Samantha described having to be islands of emotional support for their trans partners as they encountered cissexism. They also sometimes had to provide medical care, administering their partner's testosterone shots.

Pfeffer and LaRossa's (2010) study involved a small sample, and so we need to be cautious in generalizing about transgender families. But their findings suggest the power of the division of labor as an institution, where people who identify as feminist, and in the case of many of the women, queer, still struggle not to recreate gendered patterns in their partnerships.

## THE DOCTRINE OF SEPARATE SPHERES

Family life has always been gendered, but the specific form this takes for many people in modern society can be traced to the doctrine of separate spheres. For most of human history, the home was the factory and family members were the workers. This meant everyone in the family—children, wife and husband, grandparents, nephews, and so on—was expected to do the work of that particular family unit. Most of that work took place inside the home or close by, in the fields, or in a shop downstairs or next door. This is still true for many families in the United States and around the world. Among groups like the Amish in the United States, everyone's labor is necessary to sustain the family. Small family farms usually call on husband, wife, and

children to do the work necessary to feed themselves and others. Many immigrant families in the United States start businesses like restaurants or hotels, living above the restaurant or in the hotel while all members of the family help to make the business run. In places like the United States, these situations that wed work and home seem like exceptions, but for most of history and for many people, the main point of marriage has been to form a productive, self-sustaining, and successful unit.

## Modern Marriage

Marriage, in the form with which many in the United States are most familiar, is an institution that began to take shape about 150 years ago in Europe and its colonies. This particular form of marriage, which we'll call **modern marriage**, is an institution freely chosen based on love and compatibility and composed of a sole male breadwinner plus an economically dependent wife and children. The idea that people should get to choose whom they marry as individuals, largely free from the constraints placed on them by family and community, evolved in part as a result of the rise of wage labor and the simultaneous emergence of Enlightenment ideals about political and philosophical rights.

Wage labor suddenly gave young people more freedom from their parents than had existed in the past; if you could go out on your own and get a job, you became less dependent on your parents' inheritance or their influence in finding you an apprenticeship or another way of supporting yourself. This meant less pressure on young women and men to make a marriage match satisfactory to their parents. At the same time, Enlightenment philosophers began to extol the virtues of individual rights while challenging the right of institutions such as churches and the family to dictate who could marry whom. Marriage, according to Enlightenment ideals, should be freely chosen based on reason, and at least for Enlightenment thinkers, that meant marriages chosen based on love.

This radical change in marriage took some time and brought about a great deal of anxiety on the part of many people. For years, the expression of mild affection among married couples was looked down on and perceived as potentially disruptive to the real business of marriage as an institution for the smooth functioning of society. Those with the time and inclination to think about the implications of such a transformation had a long list of worries on their minds.

Would people be able to choose a spouse wisely if love were involved? If marriage was expected to make people happy, what would hold marriages together when things went for worse rather than for better? In a marriage of intimacy between men and women, would women begin to expect equality with their husbands? And if parents, churches, and states no longer made the decisions about who married whom, how could society ensure that the right people married and had children or that the wrong people did not (Coontz, 2005)? This long list of anxieties probably sounds somewhat familiar to us today, even though they were being articulated as early as the 18th century. Yet the **love marriage** is now considered the norm across many parts of the world, and where it is not, the ideology of marriage for love exerts an increasingly powerful influence through popular cultural images from the United States and other parts of the world.

The gender implications of modern marriage are most obvious in the idea of the sole male breadwinner with a dependent wife and children, an ideal that remains powerful today. With the advent of industrialization, the ideal increasingly became for women and children to stop working, inside or outside the household. It is important to note that this was an ideal, which is to say it became what many families aspired to but what many more families were never actually able to achieve. This ideal image of the modern marriage, in which the husband alone works to support his wife and children, is what gives us the doctrine of separate spheres—a spatial and gendered separation that came to have far-reaching impacts on the way we think about gender still today.

In the 19th century, in places like the United States and Europe, the process of industrialization was well under way.

Decisions had to be made about exactly who was the best candidate to be sent out to work for pay in these new factory settings, and that it would be male children or husbands was far from a given. If you've read much Charles Dickens, you know that in places like England and the United States, children commonly worked long and dangerous hours in the early days of industrialization. For families who had formerly farmed, using children as a source of labor was nothing new, although the conditions within these factories were probably far worse than anything they would have faced on a farm.

In the United States, it was common for farming families to send their unmarried daughters to work in the mills for the extra income. Sons, so the logic went, were more valuable for the physical labor they could provide on the farm, while more return on the labor of daughters could be gained from sending them to work in the factory. As we discuss in more detail in the next chapter, that husbands be the sole member of the family to work outside the home was not an inevitable development. The number of families actually able to achieve this ideal was also limited.

## Gender and the Doctrine of Separate Spheres

Nonetheless, among the limited numbers of white, middle-class families in places like the United States and Europe, the ideal family became one in which the father worked to support a woman who stayed home and was responsible for taking care of the home and children. This physical separation of the lives of women and men came to be known as the doctrine of separate spheres. According to the **doctrine of separate spheres**, it is a man's duty to take care of his family by being a breadwinner and protector, while a woman's duty is to be a good wife and mother. Women, through their association with the home and childcare, are supposed to be kind and gentle, while bold and aggressive men pursue success in the competitive world of business and the economy (Coltrane, 1996).

The doctrine of separate spheres is a complicated and far-reaching ideology, and it accomplishes several tasks related to gender. First, the doctrine of separate spheres marks two realms of our social lives as distinctly gendered. The place now emphasized as home, and as a safe harbor from the stresses of the outside world, is associated with women and femininity. Women were responsible for creating a "haven in a heartless world" (Bonvilliain, 2007, p. 184). The economic sphere in which people were paid for their labor in the formal economy became an inherently

masculine realm of social life. This realm was associated with lower moral standards, as men were expected to work in the dog-eat-dog business world.

Where the home was associated with sentiment and comfort, the world of work was associated with rationality and competition. Many scholars identify this as an important separation between the public and the private spheres. The **public sphere** is the world of market relations and productive behavior, a world labeled as distinctly masculine with the separation of spheres. This includes the world of paid labor but also all the other institutions that intersect with the concerns of the market, including politics. The doctrine of separate spheres dictated that all of these institutions were best suited for men. The **private sphere** is anything that's not public, and it is primarily the home and family life; this became defined as the place where women belonged. As an institution, the doctrine of separate spheres had a radical effect against the long backdrop of history in suddenly defining the family in relation to women and femininity and the public world of work in relation to men and masculinity.

The doctrine of separate spheres first achieved a gendering of the physical spaces and institutions of the home and work. We discuss how this matters in the world of work in more detail in the next chapter. The second change achieved by the doctrine of separate spheres was to transform the very way in which people thought about what it meant to be gendered. In a reciprocal kind of relationship, gendering the institutions of work and home in turn affected the content of gender roles for femininity and masculinity. The doctrine of separate spheres changed the way people conceived of what it meant to be a man or a woman in ways now difficult for us to understand because they have become so deeply embedded in our own gender ideologies.

The doctrine of separate spheres gives us the idea that a woman's place is in the home and everything that ideology implies about gender. The most important component of this shift is the idea that men and women are to be perceived as fundamentally different from each other. These differences surface in a variety of ways but most importantly in a shift from perceiving women as lesser versions of men to perceiving them as an entirely different species from their male counterparts. In the past, a woman could have some independent roles as a widow or unmarried woman and was considered to be a kind of "deputy husband" (Coontz, 2005, p. 170). Remember that under the previous system, there was some overlap between the tasks men and women performed, and women were perceived to be yokemates to their husbands as members of the productive labor force. In this worldview, women certainly weren't as good as men, but they really weren't that different, either. With the doctrine of separate spheres, women were no longer allowed to act in any way that would even begin to suggest they were like men.

Some specific examples help demonstrate how the separation of spheres radically transformed the meanings attached to being a woman or a man, creating this sense of fundamental differences between the two. Most traditional views of gender roles that emerged with the separation of spheres viewed mothers as the natural family member charged with the job of educating and caring for children. The qualities that make women well qualified for this role are their ability to provide maternal love and their superior feminine virtue (Laslett & Brenner, 1989). This "superior feminine virtue" originates in women's sense of morality as better than men's because women's place in the home shelters them from the worldly struggles for success and achievement. Explanations for this moral superiority were often biological, as Charles

Darwin himself believed that women were "naturally more tender and less selfish than men" (Sayers, 1987). This superior moral compass didn't actually translate into real power outside the home for women, except as they were able to exert an influence on their husbands. Some scholars suggest that the rewards of this domestic feminism were a better bet for many women than the abstract and uncertain promises of actual equality in the public realm. But the idea that women were possessed of a better sense of right and wrong than men was a relatively new concept—especially the idea that this made women better suited to the job of educating and disciplining children.

Before the separation of spheres, women were viewed as too overly indulgent to be given the responsibility of encouraging sound reasoning in their children and of helping their offspring to restrain their sinful urges; only a father, the stronger of the two parents, was truly capable of the harsh discipline considered necessary to successfully raise a child to adulthood (Coltrane, 1996). Although women did much of the direct caretaking of infants and children in earlier periods, before the 19th century, fathers were thought to have greater responsibility for children and to exert greater influence in this area. Child-rearing focused on the transmission of patriarchal authority and religious doctrine, and the idea that love and caring were necessary to these tasks would have seemed absurd to families before the doctrine of separate spheres. This was reflected in the tendency during this period for children to go with their fathers after a divorce, a practice that almost completely reversed in the 20th century. After the emergence of the doctrine of separate spheres, mothers rather than fathers came to be viewed as the expert parents and the family member most qualified and, therefore, largely responsible for the socialization of children.

A second way in which the separation of spheres influenced basic ideas about gender was in the connection between masculinity and domesticity. All things associated with the home became the exclusive realm of femininity, so any virtues that had once been associated with masculinity but stayed in the home were redefined. In the centuries leading up to these transformations in marriage and family, domesticity was an ideal toward which both men and women were assumed to aspire. The labor contributed by men and women was considered to be equally important to household functioning (Bonvilliain, 2007). Saving money, working hard, and keeping order are certainly not behaviors that would be particularly likely to be characterized as feminine today, but when men and masculinity were separated from the home, the meaning of domesticity itself changed. With it, the idea that a man should aspire to demonstrate domesticity also disappeared.

In these and many other ways, the doctrine of separate spheres created a fairly rigid gender system in which some basic components of human behavior became strictly divided along gender lines. Moral virtue belonged to women, while the ability to pursue rational and intellectual interests became the territory of men. Women as mothers were perceived as responsible for "watching over the hearts and minds of our youthful citizens" (Matthaei, 1982, p. 113), and this was their role in forming national character. Along with moral virtue, women won a monopoly on sexual purity, while men were condemned to a titanic struggle with their unseemly physical urges. In this way, the ability to have a real sexuality was divvied up along gender lines. Women's role in the family became to love and nurture, and this was the meaning given to the

tasks once considered to be part of the productive power of the household itself, while men's role became one of economic provision. Women continued to grow food for the family, tend animals, cook, repair household implements, and make clothing, but these tasks were now viewed not as economic activities but as acts of love (Coontz, 2005). The doctrine of separate spheres gave us a new word, *housework*, to describe the same activities that women had always performed. Whereas once *all work* was housework, as all productive work was done within the household, now, a new word defined what would, until the end of the 20th century, by and large be considered women's work.

### Separate Spheres in Global Perspective

The doctrine of separate spheres should sound familiar to those of us in places like the United States because it is the basic content of the "traditional" family, the decline of which causes a great deal of worry for many people. In a broad survey of the history of families and the roles played by men and women in them, a period in which women were expected to do nothing that was recognized as work is something of an anomaly. But this became the exact situation for some middle- and upper-class white women in the United States, some of whom were able to escape even housework through the use of servants and nannies. The fact that they had servants and nannies available to do housework for them means that those women (the servants and the nannies) *were* working outside their homes and, therefore, that the ideal of the separation of spheres could never be realized for all families. Working-class families were less capable of achieving a family characterized by a male breadwinner, as working-class wives often worked to supplement family income. Immigrant women and African American women were also often unable to follow the doctrine laid down by the separation of spheres, and they continued to work in factories, as agricultural workers, and as servants. Although the rates of women in general participating in the paid labor force increased throughout the end of the 19th century and into the 20th century, the number of white married women working outside the home in 1900 was less than 5% (Coltrane, 1996).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 8.2
### THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

The doctrine of separate spheres developed in Anglo-European society, and although its ideology has spread to other parts of the world, it is still, in the end, one particular idea about how labor should be divided along the lines of sex category and gender. The amount of global variation in both the types of tasks that need to be done and the ways in which sex category and gender are used to make those divisions is vast. One study that used the collection of ethnographies from 185 societies included in the World Ethnographic Sample found that two-thirds of the 50 tasks identified exhibited varying degrees of flexibility regarding gender, in that the same task was perceived as primarily masculine in one society and primarily feminine in another (Murdock & Provost, 1973). What would happen if we shifted the language we used to describe the basic ways in which people in different societies decide

who does what? As Shanshan Du (2000) suggested in her review of the extensive literature on this topic, the language of division suggests just that—a way of dividing women and men. In the new language Du suggested, what would a system of allocating tasks look like that was not necessarily based on division but instead on unity?

Du found just such a system among the Lahu, an ethnic group in southwest China. Reinforced by their myths and religious beliefs, the Lahu believe that women and men share equal roles in fertilization and conception and that this joint responsibility should extend throughout child-rearing and other tasks a household must accomplish together. This is exemplified in the strong role played by the husband during pregnancy and childbirth. The husband is expected to take over much of his wife's work during her pregnancy, and he participates in the pregnancy by monitoring his wife's experiences and bodily changes. During childbirth, the husband serves as midwife, assisting his wife in all phases of giving birth to their child and then taking care of both mother and infant during a set postpartum period. The Lahu principle of child-rearing is consistent with this theme of unity in stating that the joint efforts of father and mother in child-rearing "do not divide you and me" (Du, 2000, p. 535). Lahu parents take their infants and children with them into the fields to work, and in all facets of their life, they share responsibility for the care of children. Although mothers breastfeed, fathers are responsible for bathing infants, cleaning them up after urination and defecation, and often for holding the babies during the night to keep them from crying. In sustenance tasks, the Lahu live by the principle "work hard to eat," and here also, they believe this is a task to be shared jointly by wife and husband. Du found that 51 out of the 63 households in the Lahu village she studied had an equal share of labor, both inside and outside the household. The cases in which this labor was not shared equally were a result of illness or other social responsibilities that interfered with this general pattern.

What does the case of the Lahu reveal about different ways of understanding the division of labor and how such a system is bound to lead to division? What does it say about the role of culture and ideology in shaping households in relation to gender? How would the household division of labor look different under an ideology that suggested unity and joint effort rather than division?

The doctrine of separate spheres presents an interesting case for the ways in which identities such as race, social class, and nationality can intersect with gender. The doctrine of separate spheres, based on the statistics mentioned previously, did seem to drive many white married women, and especially white married women with children, into the exclusive sphere of the home. But the doctrine of separate spheres has always been a *proscriptive* ideal, rather than a *description* of the way large numbers of people were really living. This was true during the time period in which the separation of spheres developed and is still true today. African American, Latino, and Native American families in the United States face discrimination that often prevents them from achieving the level of economic success necessary to conform to the male breadwinner model of family. This model assumes a man with a job that pays well enough to support everyone in the family, and this has never been universally accessible to all men in the United States.

Racial discrimination and blocked economic opportunities interact with native African cultural traditions imported to the United States to create family structures in some African American communities that are much more flexible than the doctrine of separate spheres would

demand. In many of these communities, cultural norms contradict this ideology by suggesting that locating sole responsibility for the mothering of children in one person may not be wise or possible (Collins, 1990). **Othermothers** are women who may or may not be biologically related to children but play a crucial role in assisting bloodmothers with the task of caring for and raising children. Women-centered networks made up of grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins can act as othermothers. Grandmothers became especially important to the welfare of children in many African American urban communities during the epidemics of drug and crime experienced during the 1980s and 1990s; as mothers and fathers fell victim to the ravages of drug use or imprisonment, many Black grandmothers took over the raising of their children's children. Carol Stack (1974) described these women-centered networks as *fictive kin* because many Black communities extended the boundaries of those responsible for the care of children beyond the limited pool of biological relatives.

## Transnational Motherhood

Latino families in the United States have faced many of the same barriers of racism and reduced economic opportunities. Just as many Caribbean and African American women have left their families down South or in their native country to seek work in the North, Mexican and Latin American women now leave their children at home in their countries of origin to take jobs in the United States, creating a new arrangement some scholars call **transnational motherhood** (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 2005). Latina women are not immune to the cultural dictates of the doctrine of separate spheres originating in the world of white, middle-class families—an ideology that filters into Latin America through the institutions of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. Within their own cultural traditions, Latina women experience pressure as a result of the rural legacy of women who, in the past, were more easily able to combine childcare with productive agricultural work. In addition, the Catholic images of the Virgin Madonna create a strong tension between the ideals of motherhood and employment. From all these sources, Latina women face pressures to conform to the separation of spheres by dedicating themselves solely to the task of mothering and caring for the household.

But the economic circumstances of many Latino families make the possibility of a mother who stays home and dedicates all her time to childcare beyond reach. In their survey of 153 domestic workers in Los Angeles, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila (2005) found that 40% of these women had at least one of their children "back home" in their country of origin. This separation between biological mothers and their children, which sometimes lasts for decades, necessitates a redefinition of what it means to be a mother, given the ideal that biological mothers are meant to be the primary and most important caretakers of their children. Transnational Latina mothers make an important distinction between their own situations and those of mothers who may have become estranged from their children, abandoned them, disowned them, or put them up for adoption, all behaviors of which they generally disapprove. They emphasize that they are able to "mother" their children at a distance by talking to them on the phone or sending them letters and other gifts. One Salvadoran mother described this connection as "I'm here, but I'm there" (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 2005, p. 313).

Motherhood for these women is transformed to include aspects of the typically male, good provider role; mothers become breadwinners. But rather than replacing the typical caregiving role that characterizes motherhood, transnational mothers redefine breadwinning as a kind of caregiving while still seeking to maintain what limited aspects of traditional caregiving are available to them. In addition, many of these Latina mothers feel that their work helps not only to improve their children's economic situation but also to shelter their children from the kind of discrimination and racism they themselves face in the United States. Keeping their children in their country of origin means that these children never have to experience the disdain many of these women feel from their employers and others in the United States. One mother who did bring her young daughter with her to the United States was given permission by her employer for her daughter to live with her and the employee's family. This was generous, but the employer also quarantined the daughter until she saw her vaccination papers and then would not allow her to interact with her own children. The Latina mother in this case felt there were emotional costs to being with her daughter under these circumstances.

## Transnational Fatherhood

What about the husbands and fathers of these transnational families? If many women from the global South are becoming the breadwinners, how does that affect their husbands? Although a great deal of research has been done on women who migrate for work, there is less information about what happens to the men who stay at home. In their research on transnational families in Vietnam, Lan Anh Hoang and Brenda S. A. Yeoh (2011) investigated "left-behind" husbands. In Vietnam, the husbands of female migrants struggled with the implications of their wives' absence and their role as primary breadwinners. In interviews, the men often emphasized that their wives' decision to migrate was made only with their permission, asserting the Confucian view of men as the "pillar of the household" (p. 722). Among the 23 left-behind fathers the researchers interviewed, only one did not still do paid work. Although the fathers struggled with balancing their work with the demands of caring for children, they all felt it was important to continue working for pay to avoid being perceived as a man who was sponging off his wife.

In places like Sri Lanka and the Philippines, female relatives are the primary caregivers in families with a migrant mother (Save the Children, 2006). Studies on Mexican transnational families have similarly demonstrated a preference for maternal grandmothers to take over the care of children in their mother's absence (Dreby, 2010). But in Vietnam, survey research indicates that 71% of children in families with a mother who had migrated were cared for by their fathers; only 18% were cared for by their paternal grandmothers. Some of the men in Hoang and Yeoh's (2011) study had been involved in parenting even before their wives migrated. The researchers found that Vietnamese men had a flexible view of masculinity that allowed for them to prioritize the presence of a parent in their children's lives—even if that parent was the father. In some cases, men had left their own jobs overseas to come home and care for children when their wives decided to migrate. Although ideas about masculinity sometimes made it difficult for left-behind men to negotiate their roles, they did not prevent men from becoming primary caregivers in their wives' absence.

On a global scale, the experiences of these transnational families are probably more typical than families that perfectly conform to the doctrine of separate spheres. Where women around the world do not engage in paid work in the formal economy, they still work to feed and clothe their children. Women are also much more likely, especially in the global South, to work in the informal economy; the most recent UN report indicated that 60% of women in the developing world work in the informal economy (Braun, 2005). Informal economic activities can include illegal activities such as prostitution or selling and manufacturing drugs, which are not included in the formal calculations of economic activity because they are off the books. But such activities can also include selling goods at a market or performing legal services that are paid off the books. Some estimates suggest that more than half of agricultural work worldwide is done by women. These statistics are important to keep in mind to demonstrate the ways in which the doctrine of separate spheres, assuming it is a desirable or optimal form of family organization, is feasible for a very small percentage of the world's population. Yet the power of its ideology is exerted within the United States and around the world in its pressure on determining how families should divvy up important tasks.

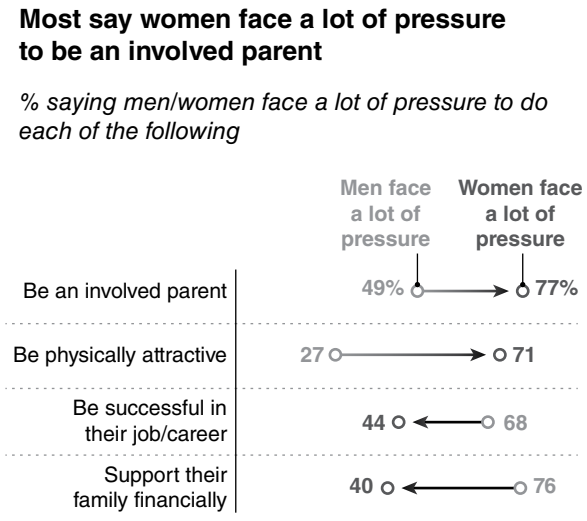
## Disability and Risky Mothers

Ideal parenthood contains underlying assumptions that parents should be physically present, a requirement transnational parents struggle to meet. The modern myths of intensive mothering combined with what disability scholars call the normalcy project both conspire to complicate parenting for women with disabilities. In fact, Angela Frederick (2017), in her study of mothers with sensory and physical disabilities, finds that these women become defined as "risky mothers."

**Intensive mothering** (also known as "total motherhood" or "scientific motherhood") is a modern ideal held up for women in which being a "good mother" becomes an all-consuming project, demanding that mother's manage their children's development in "partnership" with medical and scientific experts (Frederick, p. 75). For many mothers in places like the United States, mothers are expected to be up-to-date on all the latest scientific and medical knowledge about how to best raise their children. They're seen as being in partnership with doctors and their expert advice, but the partnership is not an equal one. Doctors' knowledge takes precedence. This medicalization of motherhood can be seen especially in American attitudes toward pregnancy, where the needs of mothers increasingly take second place to those of their unborn children. Figure 8.1 demonstrates the effects of intensive mothering in the different pressures experienced by mothers and fathers.

**The normalcy project** is a concept that originates from the intersection of feminism and disability studies to describe a regime of beliefs and practices, emanating from science and medicine, that are preoccupied with eradicating disability and that prize a typical body (Frederick, p. 76). In relation to motherhood, the normalcy project demands that women perform as "perfectly normal reproducers," and any deviation from that ideal is seen as dangerous and irresponsible (p. 76). This "perfect motherhood" experience is more available to white, middle-class, cis women. Mothers are also expected to possess healthy, "typical" bodies.

**FIGURE 8.1 ■ Most Say Women Face a Lot of Pressure to Be an Involved Parent**




*Source:* Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 8–21 and Sept. 14–28, 2017, "On Gender Differences, No Consensus on Nature vs. Nurture," Pew Research Center.

The effects of the normalcy project combined with intensive mothering lead to disabled mothers feeling the effect of **the medical stare**, or the uniquely forceful and pathologizing medical gaze upon disabled bodies. Doctors and medical experts work with the state to define disabled mothers as "unruly bodies," in need of surveillance, intervention, and public scrutiny. Research demonstrates that though disabled parents are no more likely to mistreat their children than able-bodied parents, Deaf/disabled mothers experience higher rates of state intervention, including the threat of having their children removed from their care (Frederick, 2015). Removal rates where parents have a psychiatric disability are as high as 70% to 80%, while rates for parents with an intellectual disability are 40% to 80%. Among parents with physical disabilities, 13% have reported discriminatory treatment in custody cases (National Council on Disability, 2012).

In her interviews, Frederick documents several examples of the medical stare as applied to disabled mothers. Denise, who is blind, was asked by her obstetrician/gynecologist if all her children still lived with her and whether she would be getting "fixed" (rendered infertile) (Frederick, 2015, p. 82). Another blind woman, Fatu, recalled a hospital social worker who tried to convince her to immediately give her child up for adoption, saying, "Your husband isn't going to want to raise this baby by himself" (p. 82). Eleanor is paralyzed on one side and had to deal with her pediatrician initiating an investigation from child protective services based solely on her disability. Social workers found no evidence of abuse or neglect, but because of the medical stare, Elenor was considered a "risky mother" and had to endure the stress and trauma of an investigation that could have led to the removal of her children.

Mothers like Elenor felt they had to perform a perfect version of motherhood in front of medical professionals in order to avoid the penalizing consequences of the medical stare. Karla,

who has a physical disability, recalls her terror when hospital staff told her they were sending a home nurse to her house after the birth of her first child: "I was terrified. I didn't know if she would be looking in my refrigerator, in my cabinets. I told my husband, 'We've got to get the house clean! I've got to be on point!'" (Frederick, 2015, p. 83). Monica, a blind woman, felt a similar pressure, especially given that she knew of two recent cases in which the newborns of blind parents had been removed from their custody.

The example of disabled parents and "risky mothers" demonstrates how the ideal of women as somehow inherently equipped to raise children only applies to certain mothers. For mothers who exist on the fringes of the normalcy project, the ability to parent is far from a given.

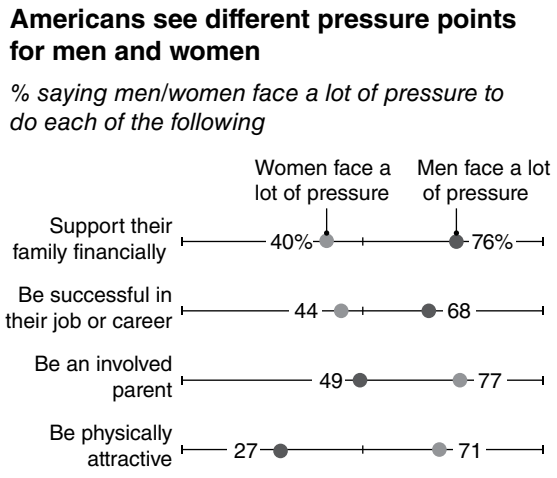
## THE DIVISION OF HOUSEHOLD LABOR

The legacy of the doctrine of separate spheres is still very much with us today when we think about what it means to be in a family and what the respective roles of women and men are within this institution. The separation of spheres sets the terms for the current debates about how two of the most important institutions in our lives—work and family—should interact. For men, the separation of spheres made it difficult to do anything but work for money outside the home. Some sociologists have identified this as the good provider role for men.

The **good provider role** dictates that a man's primary obligation to his family is to work so as to meet his family's material needs. A father, according to the good provider role, does not need to perform the day-to-day tasks of caring for his children or keeping a household running. The good provider role narrows a man's obligation to his family to its economic value and, in this sense, sets up a tension between the world of work and the world of home for men. A man fulfilling his main obligation to his family according to this role will spend as much time and energy as possible trying to make money or increase the amount of money he can contribute to his family. In this way, the good provider role puts a great deal of stress on men who are not able to fulfill this financial obligation to their family, and it causes stress for men who are able to do so in regard to the prospect of losing that ability. In a sense, the separation of spheres and the good provider role encourage men to focus more of their time and energy away from their family as well as potentially intensifying the stress they feel about their work lives. Figure 8.2 demonstrates how the doctrine of separate spheres creates different pressures on women and men.

This effect of the doctrine of separate spheres on masculinity helps explain another element of contemporary Anglo-European manhood. We discussed three of these elements in the previous chapter: "No Sissy Stuff," "Be a Sturdy Oak," and "Give 'em Hell." The fourth element, "**Be a Big Wheel**," emphasizes the way in which masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth, and status (Brannon, 1976). The expression "He who dies with the most toys wins" is a good encapsulation of the Be a Big Wheel ideal for masculinity. In the good provider role, economic success is specifically linked to the ability to provide for a family, while the Be a Big Wheel dictate is largely unconnected from the family. You might consider Be a Big Wheel to be the good provider role on steroids; exactly how much money do you have to make to be a good provider? This transformation represents a general shift in masculinity in the United States from ideals based on men's role in the family to an increasing emphasis on men's success in the marketplace.

**FIGURE 8.2 ■ Americans See Different Pressure Points for Men and Women**




*Source:* Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 8–21 and Sept. 14–28, 2017, "On Gender Differences, No Consensus on Nature vs. Nurture," Pew Research Center.

Table 8.2 summarizes David and Brannon's rules of masculinity.

For women, the doctrine of separate spheres tells them not just that the home is their natural environment but also that any desires they might have to explore the world outside the home are a violation of femininity. Early in the development of the separation of spheres, women not able to stay in the home were considered to be immoral, degenerate, "fallen" women, and the line between housewife and harlot was a thin one indeed (Coontz, 2005). Doctors of the time worried that women who sought an education had "masculine brains" that would prevent them from being able to fulfill the task of motherhood (Bonvilliain, 2007). In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the doctrine of separate spheres was

**TABLE 8.2 ■ David and Brannon's Rules of Masculinity**

| | |
|---|---|
| "No Sissy Stuff" | Stigma attached to all feminine characteristics and behavior, especially openness and vulnerability |
| "Be a Big Wheel" | Emphasis on success, status, and the need to be looked up to |
| "Be a Sturdy Oak" | Manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance |
| "Give 'em Hell" | Aura of aggression, violence, and daring |

*Source:* David, D. S., & Brannon, R. (Eds.). (1976). *The forty-nine percent majority.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

so powerful that any woman who intentionally violated it could simply not be a real, biological woman. Certainly, we no longer question the biological femaleness of women who work outside the home, but the idea that taking care of children and the home is an important duty, and perhaps something that women are more inclined to want to do because of their natural instincts, is still very much with us today.

## THINK ABOUT IT

Can you think of other examples of the cultural imperative for men to "Be a Big Wheel"?

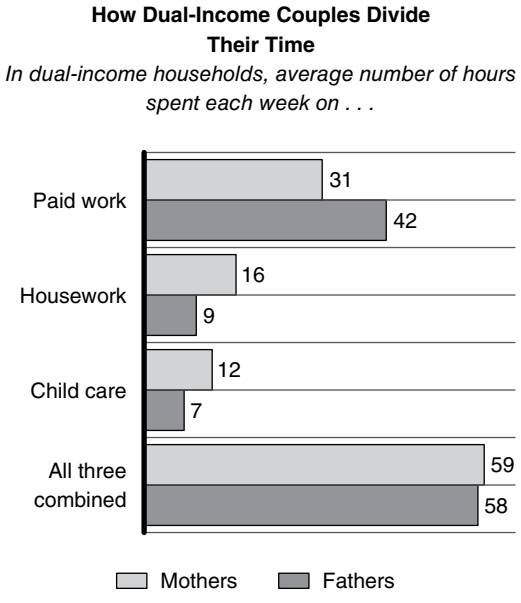
### The Second Shift

If you question whether this is necessarily the case, you need only look at the consensus of research social scientists have done in the past 60 years or so on the division of household labor. The division of household labor is a concept that makes sense only after the doctrine of separate spheres, in that it makes a distinction between all the labor that happens outside the house and the labor that occurs within the household. In this sense, the **household division of labor** is the way in which the tasks necessary to the care and running of a household are distributed. The content of these tasks varies depending on exactly who is in the household and what the household is like, but in places like the United States, these tasks generally include childcare in families with children, as well as cooking, cleaning, laundry, yardwork, household maintenance, financial accounting, kin-keeping (maintaining relationships with extended family), and car maintenance.

As more married women with children began entering the labor force in the United States in the 1960s, social scientists became increasingly interested in how families handled the household division of labor. All the studies have reached consensus on two facts, using a wide variety of research methods. First, women do a larger share of household labor of all types than do men (Bianchi et al., 2000; Schneider, 2011). Figure 8.3 summarizes some key statistics on the division of household labor.

In her famous book on this topic, Arlie Hochschild (1989) labeled this the *second shift*. The **second shift** is the extra burden of childcare and housework added on for women who also do paid work outside the home, and in Hochschild's study, this second shift meant that women worked an average of 15 hours longer per week than men, adding an extra month's worth of 24-hour workdays each year to a working woman's life. The second finding from this body of research is that women and men perform distinctly different types of tasks within the household. This is true even for **dual-earner couples**, or couples in which both spouses are working, and for those couples deeply committed to a more egalitarian division of household labor. Families attempting to achieve equality in their division of labor can attend classes and workshops to help them in this goal, including instruction on complicated spreadsheets to track the amount of time each spouse spends on various tasks (Belkin, 2008).

**FIGURE 8.3 ■ How Dual-Income Couples Divide Their Time**




*Source:* "Modern Parenthood," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC (March, 2013). http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/03/14/modern-parenthood-roles-of-moms-and-dads-converge-as-they-balance-work-and-family/

*Note*: Based on adults ages 18 to 64 who are currently married or living with a partner, working either full or part time, and have their own child(ren) in the household.

When many workplaces and schools shut down in March of 2020 in the United States as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, some experts predicted that this global emergency would have positive effects on the household division of labor. Especially for families with one or more parent doing remote work, surely, fathers would step up in their contribution to both housework and childcare. Some initial reports suggested that this might be the case. Surveys conducted early in the pandemic shutdown did show fathers participating in more domestic activities, especially fathers who worked from home (Carlson et al., 2020; Lyttelton et al., 2020). But subsequent research demonstrated that the unequal division of household labor was not undone during the pandemic and might have become worse for some families.

In one survey conducted in 2021, 64% of college-educated mothers said they'd reduced their working hours, compared to 36% of college-educate fathers and 52% of college-educated women without young children (Zamarro et al., 2021). In April of 2020, 1 in 3 employed mothers reported that they were the main caregivers in their family, compared with only 1 in 10 employed fathers. Mothers spent significantly more time doing housework and childcare in April and May of 2020 than they have prepandemic. Children spent twice as much time with telecommuting moms than they did with dads.

The effects of this extra burden on the part of mothers during the pandemic was felt in many ways. By early June of 2020, 30% of women without children and 34% of women with

children reported being at least mildly distressed, compared to only 19% of men—with and without kids (Zamarro et al., 2021). More telecommuting mothers than fathers reported feeling anxious, depressed, and lonely (Lyttelton et al., 2020). Another study of dual-earner couples found that many more mothers than fathers had either left the workforce or considered that option. Finally, mothers with children younger than 10 years old were more than twice as likely to worry that their performance was being judged negatively (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

## THINK ABOUT IT

How did the division of household labor change or stay the same for your family during the pandemic? Was gender part of that shift?

### Understanding the Household Division of Labor

Why is creating an equal division of who does what in the house so difficult that even the opportunity presented by a radical shift in how work is done during the pandemic not enough to shift the line?

One interesting way to try to answer this question is to consider what happens when we take gender out of the equation, assuming for the moment that such a thing is possible. Certainly, in today's society, we can't observe a family of genderless people raising children; gender identities may be shifting in interesting ways, but no one can yet claim to be genderless. What we can look at are situations in which the genders of the adult couple that form a family are the same.

Gay and lesbian families provide an interesting case in which two people of the same gender form a household and are faced with the same set of decisions about who exactly will do what. Regardless of your sexual identity, there's garbage to be taken out, meals to be provided, clothes to be washed, and some level of cleanliness and order to be maintained. When you add the increasing numbers of gay and lesbian couples who have children through artificial insemination, adopt children, or who already have biological children from previous heterosexual relationships, you add to the mix of household responsibilities the task of caring and providing for children. In these situations, there are no gender norms to provide a guide for who should do what. How do gay and lesbian families decide who makes the bed, cleans the toilet, changes diapers, or puts the children to bed?

In theory, many scholars have argued that the division of household labor among gay and lesbian couples should be more egalitarian than it is among heterosexual couples. In the absence of gender difference, no one partner is expected to do more of the household labor or to take on certain types of tasks rather than others. This happens in heterosexual couples because of the power of gender as the easiest way of making the difficult decisions about who should take responsibility for all the tasks associated with being a family. There are competing perspectives about exactly how this works, drawing on the different gender theories we discussed in Chapter 2.

An institutional approach to explaining the gendered household division of labor points to the ways in which marriage as an institution comes with its own set of norms about how a family should work. What individuals want or desire in a particular situation is less important than the restraints placed on them by their position within an existing institution. Institutions like marriage and family provide social scripts for actors that serve as guides for appropriate action. Since the separation of spheres within the family, these social scripts have influenced the personal attributions of couples, their habits, and the practical actions they take (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). In the context of the family, this includes who should be the provider, how household labor should be divided, and who should organize family dinners, to name just a few. Marriage and family as gendered institutions give us easy answers to these questions; men should be the providers, women should do childcare while men do outdoor household chores, and women should be in charge of organizing family dinners.

Escaping this prescribed division of household labor is difficult, from an institutional perspective, because the desire of any individuals to do things differently always encounters the power of institutions to guide our actions. Even our attempts to violate the norms of an institution will still be responses to those guidelines. For example, gays and lesbians who marry are in many ways offering a challenge to the institution of marriage and seeking to alter that institution in important ways. But in posing this challenge, most gay and lesbian couples still follow the institutional norm of engaging in a wedding or commitment ceremony. Their challenge to the institution of marriage is also conditioned by its norms. From this perspective, wives and husbands as well as mothers and fathers find escaping the prescribed household division of labor difficult because institutions exert a powerful influence on our behaviors. Although institutions may give us some wiggle room, we remain largely within the power of their grip.

Another theoretical perspective often used to explain the persistent power of the gendered household division of labor is doing gender. From the doing-gender perspective, the most important location for gender is within our day-to-day interactions. Marriage as an institution may place some constraints on our behavior, but women and men follow gender norms about the household division of labor primarily because this is a way to produce an accountable performance of gender. Gender is performed in the ways in which our behaviors are understood by someone else as representing femininity or masculinity, thereby indicating that someone is male or female. Our performance of gender creates and reinforces our belief in the underlying reality of gender and sex categories.

The household division of labor is an important means within family systems for the performance of gender. A man can produce an accountable performance of gender by working to support his family, placing a priority on his role as a breadwinner, and demonstrating less of a sense of responsibility for childcare and housework. An accountable performance is not necessarily a performance that follows gender norms perfectly; fathers who are the primary caregivers for their children are not mistakenly assumed to be women. But their behaviors are always understood within the framework of gender expectations about the division of labor; men who do not work outside the home but take care of their children full time are congratulated for their

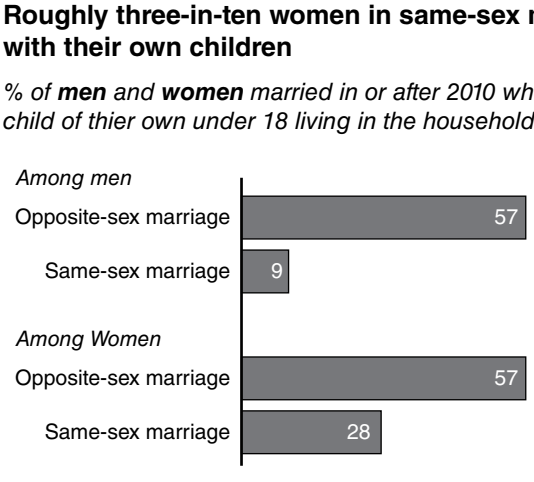
actions, especially by women. A woman who stays home full time to take care of her children is not likely to be praised for such an activity because it is what is expected of her. According to a doing-gender perspective, the household division of labor remains in place because of its importance as a resource for the performance of gender.

## Gay and Lesbian Households

What happens to these theories in the context of families formed by same-gender couples? Do the rules laid out for women and men in families based on their gender disappear when there are two mothers or two fathers? Most of the research on same-gender marriages and families focuses on lesbian couples. These include families formed by lesbian women who give birth to children in the context of a heterosexual relationship and later form a lesbian family or stepfamily. Figure 8.4 demonstrates some of the differences in family structure among straight, gay, and lesbian family structures.

Increasingly, lesbian families also consist of comothers who choose to have a child or children together through donor insemination (more common) or adoption (less frequent). These families show considerable strengths, as research demonstrates that the division of household labor among lesbian couples is more egalitarian than in heterosexual couples (Dunne, 2000; Fulcher et al., 2008; Patterson et al., 2004; Vanfraussen et al., 2003). Lesbian couples also demonstrate a higher level of satisfaction with their relationships and with each other as parents (Bos et al., 2004, 2007).

**FIGURE 8.4 ■ Roughly 3 in 10 Women in Same-Sex Marriages Live With Their Own Children**


Roughly three-in-ten women in same-sex marriages live with their own children
% of men and women married in or after 2010 who have at least one child of thier own under 18 living in the household, by marriage type
Among men
Opposite-sex marriage
57
Same-sex marriage
9
Among Women
Opposite-sex marriage
57
Same-sex marriage
28

*Source:* Pew Research Center analysis of the 2019 American Community Sirveu (IPUMS).

*Note: Estimates refer to U.S. adults ages 18 and older who are married, spouse present. A child of their own includes a stepchild, an adopted child, or a biological child.*

As with heterosexual couples, the dynamics within lesbian relationships change when children enter the picture. Like their heterosexual counterparts, lesbian couples without children share housework more equally than do couples with children (Kurdek, 2007). In addition, research suggests that when lesbians transition into parenthood, warmth decreases while conflict somewhat increases (Goldberg & Sayer, 2006). Becoming parents, for lesbian couples, also intensifies differentiation between partners in terms of childcare and paid employment (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007). As we might expect with heterosexual couples along gender lines (in which mothers are expected to be closer to children than fathers), children within lesbian families sometimes have a closer relationship with one or the other parent during the early years (Gartrell et al., 2000; Goldberg et al., 2008). In these ways, lesbian families demonstrate similar dynamics to those of heterosexual couple families.

In addition, some researchers have begun to suggest that the egalitarianism demonstrated thus far in lesbian families might be a product of race, social class, and educational levels rather than the gender and/or sexual identity of these families. These findings demonstrate the importance of an intersectional approach by highlighting the differences among lesbian women from different racial and social class backgrounds. Recent analyses suggest that the population of lesbian families is much more diverse than the mostly white, middle-class, highly educated samples used for research previously (Gates & Ost, 2004; Sears & Badgett, 2004; Sears et al., 2005). New studies tell us that lesbian couples living in areas with relatively low concentrations of other same-sex couples have the highest odds of raising children and that lesbian women of color are more likely to be raising children than their white counterparts.

The ideal family structure for lesbian women of color and working-class lesbian women may be quite different from that of their middle-class, white counterparts. Moore (2008) found that egalitarianism meant something different to Black lesbian stepfamilies. These couples emphasized financial independence, labor/work participation, and sharing the provider role and saw these as more important than an equal division of household labor or childcare. The biological mothers in these Black lesbian couples did more housework and childcare than their partners and therefore had more power in decision-making as it related to children. A study of working-class lesbian couples in the United Kingdom found that "mother" and "father" roles were not equally shared (Gabb, 2004, 2005). In many of the working-class lesbian families, one mother occupied a more maternal role, such as primary caretaker, whereas the other mother played a more paternal role.

Though there's still a considerable gap in the research on gay men who form families, increasing numbers of gay men no longer see coming out as homosexual as incompatible with having children (Berkowitz, 2007; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). When gay men parent, they violate many versions of hegemonic masculinity, which relegate nurturing activities to women; they also violate some of the dominant gender and sexual norms of gay culture (Stacey, 2007). In addition, gay men face legal barriers to their parenthood as well as general prejudices against their becoming fathers, including beliefs that gay fathers might be pedophiles, that they might bring up gay children, and that their kids will be harassed (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). Research from the National Study of Gay and Lesbian Parents suggests that gay men coparent more equally and compatibly

than the average heterosexual couple (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). Gay fathers divided childcare and housework similarly to the lesbian couples in the same study. Researchers Silverstein et al. (2002) call this **degendered parenting**, a way of dividing housework and childcare that's based on personal choice, aptitude, and fairness rather than the gendered division of labor.

Degendered parenting has its advantages in that it might lead to a more egalitarian division of household labor. But as we discussed, institutions also provide a road map for how to do things like get married and raise children. Even within same-gender families, it's sometimes hard to escape the norms set out for parenting and families. For example, within lesbian families, biology (being the mother who carried and gave birth to children) often still matters in shaping family dynamics. In lesbian families, biological mothers often provide more primary childcare (Dempsey, 2005; Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2007; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002) and enjoy somewhat closer relationships with their children (Bos et al., 2007; Dempsey, 2005). Research reveals that children sometimes feel more positively about the biological mother and that this could lead to comothers feeling jealousy toward the primary parent (Chrisp, 2001; Sullivan, 2004) as well as unease about their identity as a mother (Gabb, 2005). In some families, comothers felt as if the children's behavior excluded them because they were not "directly related" (Gabb, 2004, p. 169).

Negotiating identities and positions within the family can be difficult for lesbian households. In addition, institutions that intersect with the family—like the law—can add an extra layer of difficulty. When a heterosexual couple have a biological child, both biological parents are assumed to have some legal rights. This is not the case in a lesbian family, where the status of the biological mother may be clear but the status of the comother may not be. According to one study, many lesbian couples who had children through donor insemination (DI) pursued adoption for the nonbiological mother, both to offset her nonbiological relatedness and to reduce the salience of biology to parties like grandparents (Hequembourg, 2004). These DI couples consciously sought to avoid using language that made distinctions between the mothers based on biology with the children and others. Establishing the nonbiological mother's role was more difficult in stepfamilies, where the presence of the father and paternal grandparents made it harder for comothers to establish a parent identity for the nonbiological mother (Hequembourg, 2004; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). Some research suggests that the stress caused by unequal biological, legal, and social statuses in relation to the children makes lesbian couples in these situations more likely to split up (Andersson et al., 2006).

This research demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of attempts to remake institutions such as marriage and family. On the one hand, reimagining marriage and family as between two people of the same gender provides the possibility of escaping the strict gender rules connected to the household division of labor. When marriage involves two women or two men, there are no preconceived expectations about who should take out the trash or change the baby's diaper. This can create space to imagine a less oppressive version of the family. On the other hand, the social status of a gay or lesbian parent doesn't come with the ready-made set of privileges and expectations that's attached to "mother" or "father." Nonbiological parents are not granted the same legal rights regarding their children. Because their role is a relatively new one in society, it may be difficult for people inside and outside the family to understand.

## Power and the Household Division of Labor

You might ask yourself at this point exactly what's so bad about this separation of the world into public and private spheres, good providers and housewives. Is it really so bad for a woman to want to take care of her children and her house while her husband works to support the family? Aren't these both pretty important tasks that need to be accomplished? These are all good questions, and they lead us to one of the central questions surrounding gender issues in general. Is it OK for men and women simply to want to do different types of things? If we assume that gender equality is something we want, does equality also mean that everyone does the same thing? Can you have equality and still acknowledge that maybe women are somehow better at or more inclined to do certain things, like taking care of children? Why does that necessarily have to make women and men unequal?

These are big questions without any definite answer. In the specific case of the separation of spheres and the division between paid work and housework, our culture places a great deal more value on paid work. Research suggests that the amount of power a woman has in a family is related to the income she contributes (Hochschild, 1989; Juber, 1988; Kamo, 1988). In India, many women who are part of dual-earner couples are able to negotiate a reduced share of housework for themselves because of their economic contribution to the household. Women who do paid work outside the home seem to have a greater say in important decisions that impact the entire family, such as buying a home, moving, changing jobs, educating children, and figuring out who will do housework (Baxter, 1992; Coleman, 1988). Within the family itself, then, women's role as caretakers does not seem to be viewed as equally important to the role of economic provider; the person responsible for primary caregiving and housework loses out within the power dynamics of the family unit.

Researchers and feminists suggest that this loss of power experienced by women who work inside the home translates to a lack of power outside the family as well. In this argument, the household division of labor is an important part of explaining women's inequality across society, beyond the borders of the family as an institution. The tasks of taking care of a home and children are devalued within families and in society at large. In one study that evaluated the amount of skill necessary to do different jobs (and the amount of pay appropriate for the job), evaluators ranked attendants at dog pounds and parking lots over nursery school teachers and ranked zookeepers more highly than day care workers (England, 1992). These evaluations suggest that taking care of animals and parking lots is perceived as having greater value and requiring more skill than taking care of small children. That women are of the gender more likely to be engaged in these tasks means that women themselves come to be devalued. Childcare workers in day care centers and those who work in private homes as nannies are some of the lowest-paid workers, demonstrating the monetary value placed on these tasks when done by persons outside the family.

The United States specifically provides little government support for parents who would like to take time off from the labor force to do childcare; the United States and Australia are the only industrialized nations that provide no federally mandated paid parental leave. The lack of any policy that would make childcare easier for working parents can be perceived as an indication of the low priority placed on the act of caring for children, especially when compared with

the government support provided for other services important to society as a whole, such as military service. Although prior to the doctrine of separate spheres, much of the work done by women and men within the household was considered to be productive labor, in today's world, most of the work done inside the home is not considered real work at all. The hard task of keeping a household running and caring for children is something that becomes associated with the private, feminine sphere. Tasks that were once considered essential components of a productive and stable household, such as preparing meals, are now viewed as reflections of women's emotional and nurturing nature, existing outside the rationality of the public sphere. The area where women's traditionally primary role as caregiver perhaps has the greatest effect outside the family is in the world of work, and we explore these connections in more detail in the next chapter.

For now, we can say that one of the most important results of the doctrine of separate spheres was the creation of not just a difference in how we think about what men and women do but also a hierarchy in how those tasks are valued. The separation of spheres created important splits between what we view as masculine and what we view as feminine, both within individual people and in dividing specific areas of society. Just as the home became feminine and the workplace became masculine, all the qualities associated with home became the exclusive territory of women, and all the qualities associated with the workplace were distributed to men. If these two life areas—public and private, work and home—were truly valued equally, the consequences would not be as great. But in cultures like the United States, we believe that the important stuff of the world takes place in the public realm, and defining that world as masculine puts women at a distinct disadvantage.

## FAMILIES IN TRANSITION

You may have noticed that in many of today's societies, people seem to be pretty worried about both the state of marriage and the related state of what they often call *the family*. At this point, a term like *the family* might make you a little nervous. What exactly do people mean when they talk about the family? Do they mean your family? Do they mean families in Italy or on Native American Indian reservations in the Southwest? Is there something called the family that covers all those situations? Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on your point of view), family is no easier to define than is marriage. The U.S. Census needs a definition it can use to go out and measure the status and characteristics of this thing called family. According to the census, a family is a group of individuals who cohabit and are related by blood in the first degree, marriage, or adoption. This definition is limited in that it excludes any group of people who are not related by blood, marriage, or adoption but think of themselves very much as family—what social scientists are now calling families of choice (Weston, 1991).

As discussed in Chapter 6, the idea of families of choice originated within gay and lesbian communities, in which individuals were often cut off from their biological families and therefore formed new family relationships of their own choosing with people not necessarily related to them by blood. The idea has spread beyond gay and lesbian communities to include urban people in general who form tight-knit groups of friends, neighbors, or coworkers who serve many of the functions normally reserved for family. If this is hard to imagine, you need only

think of television shows such as *Insecure* or *Sex and the City* or *Girls*, in which the relationships among friends are the focus much more so than the relations within a biological family; when the characters on these television shows need help or support, it is their friends to whom they turn rather than their biological family members.

If the modern family most closely resembles the nuclear family, families of choice represent what Judith Stacey (1996) called the *postmodern family*. The **nuclear family** or modern family consists of a husband and wife (one male and one female), living in the same house with their biological children, where the father is expected to provide financial support while the mother takes care of the home and children. The **postmodern family**, in contrast to the modern family, is a changing, unsettled recombination of different family forms. If you remember our discussion of postmodernism from Chapter 3, you'll recall that postmodern thinking emphasizes the problems with meta-narratives, that is, with coming up with one story that seeks to explain all the diverse experiences that exist in the real world.

The idea of the postmodern family acknowledges the difficulty in figuring out exactly what makes a family—precisely because the form that real families take is always changing. In addition, any attempt to come up with one definite, all-inclusive definition, like the one used by the U.S. Census, is automatically going to exclude some people who seem pretty family-like in important ways. The postmodern family, then, can include the families of gay and lesbian couples with biological or adopted children as well as heterosexuals who consider close groups of friends to be more family-like than their biological families. The postmodern family also helps to account for the experiences of transnational families, like the Latina workers in Los Angeles we discussed previously, who often work to maintain the ties of family across great distances and with increasing mobility (Zinn, 2000).

The postmodern family certainly seems to be a better way of making sense of what family life increasingly looks like in places like the United States and around the world. As an interesting experiment, you might go around the room or take a mental census of your group of friends, classmates, or coworkers and count how many of them are the product of a modern family. That is, how many people do you know who grew up in a family with a mother and father who were married to each other, are still married to each other, and have only ever been married to each other, where the mom stayed home and the dad worked, and all the children were biological? Assuming you know anyone who fits this profile, what are the chances that they'll marry only once, stay married, have biological children, and conform to the gender norms of the mom staying home and the dad working? Statistics tell us that the chances that you know someone who fits this particular family profile are fairly slim. In 2021, of the 130 million households in America, only 17.8% are headed by a married couple with children under the age of 18. That's down from 18.6% in 2020 and compares to 40% of all households in 1970 (Tanzi, 2021).

For the first time, according to census records in 2005, married couples have become the minority category among all households in the United States, meaning that most American households do not include a married couple (Roberts, 2007). In 2019, roughly 4 in 10 adults between the ages of 25 and 54 were unpartnered, meaning they were neither married nor living with a partner (Fry & Parker, 2021). That's up from 29% in 1990. Men are now more likely to be unmarried than women, a shift from 30 years ago, when the reverse was true. Millennials

are less likely than any other generation to be living with family as defined in the traditional sense—a spouse and a child or children (Barrosso et al., 2020). One in 3 kids in the U.S. live in a single-parent family, over half in single mother households (Ann E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Black and Native American children are more likely to be in single-parent households, at 64% of all Black children and 52% of Native American children.

Although the overall divorce rate in the United States has fallen (in 2020, 2.3 divorces per 1,000 people compared with 5.3 in 1981), the rate of divorce after remarriage has increased relative to rates in the 1950s, and 43% of all marriages will end in divorce within 15 years (Coontz, 2005). Both women and men are waiting longer to marry, and increasing numbers of people in the United States and Europe are living together and having children without ever marrying, including large numbers of heterosexual couples who *could* marry if they so choose (unlike gay and lesbian couples in many places, who once could not legally marry; Kiernan, 2002). Experts estimate that 50% of children in the United States will spend at least part of their lives in a household that does not contain both of their married, biological parents (Coontz, 2005). All these statistics add up to fewer and fewer people raised in the modern, nuclear family and to fewer and fewer people choosing to form these kinds of families themselves.

If we remember that part of the modern family also includes the ideal of the male sole breadwinner, dependent children, and mother as caretaker and homemaker, the percentage of families conforming to this ideal becomes even smaller. In 2017, 41% of mothers were the sole or primary breadwinners, which meant their job(s) brought in at least half of the household income. Another 23.2% of mothers were co-breadwinners, contributing 25% of earnings (Glynn, 2019. Among women with children younger than age 6, 6% were in the labor force in 2021, compared to 94% of fathers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

This is a small slice of the extensive mountain of statistics that can be assembled to demonstrate the increasing rarity of the modern family. Often, these statistics are consulted to sound a warning bell about the demise of marriage and the family. In this story, the modern, nuclear family is quickly becoming extinct relative to its predominance in some mythical past. We've already discussed how this story about the demise of marriage and the family all depends on what your reference point is. Even if we take the 1950s, post–World War II United States as our starting point for the decline of marriage, the story doesn't hold true. Behind the façade of the happy nuclear family of the 1950s, 20% of all couples considered their marriage unhappy, and between one-quarter and one-third of all marriages of the time ended in divorce (Coontz, 1992). Still, it might be difficult to completely give up on the idea that marriage and families were simpler or better at some point in the past. We might take some comfort, though, from thinking about the many forms these two institutions have taken over time and across different places. There is no one way to do marriage or family successfully; much depends on how these institutions fit into the larger context of the society or culture in which they exist.

The modern family, as we discuss in the next chapter, is a current impossibility, in part because of the economic structure of our societies. It is simply not possible for many families around the world to survive on only one income, and this has been impossible for many families for a long time. It is also probably no longer possible in places like the United States to return to marriages that are not based on love and choice; immigrant groups with a tradition of arranged

marriages soon assimilate to a model of love marriage, and you'd be hard-pressed to convince most Americans to marry someone chosen for them by their parents. On the other hand, despite the many changes and variations in the exact meaning of marriage and families, these institutions continue to persist across all cultures. What we call a family in the 21st century may look very different than it once did, but we still place a great deal of importance on having a group of people who serve those particular functions. Despite the increasing age at first marriage and the divorce rate, most people in the United States will marry at some point. What marriage means to them may change, but tying the knot still seems to be a fairly popular thing to do.

In relation to gender, the case of marriage and families demonstrates the complex ways in which institutions become important sites for establishing gender differences and hierarchies. We can debate whether the primary purpose of marriage is to oppress women, but when we examine the household division of labor, it does seem that families contribute to the maintenance of existing systems of inequality. Changes to these institutions have important gender implications for society as a whole. The separation of spheres radically transformed family life in ways that still influence us today and had deep-seated implications for the way we think about gender. Some changes to marriage and families as institutions have helped to lessen gender inequality. No-fault divorce laws made it much easier for women to escape abusive relationships. But marriage and families are also some of the most personal and therefore most controversial sites for making gender distinctions. The gay marriage debate is, in part, a question about whether marriage is an institution that is inherently gendered or whether it can be separated from the idea of woman and man. In this way, discussions of marriage and families go to the heart of questions about whether the project of ending gender inequality is also a project of ridding ourselves of all gender differences.•

## BIG QUESTIONS

- In this chapter, we explored the difficulty of defining basic concepts like marriage and family. What makes coming up with one definition important? Why do we look for definitions, and what kind of power do definitions have?
- Based on what you read in this chapter, how would gender be different in a society with no marriage and no family? What would marriage and family be like in a society with no gender?
- In this chapter, we explored many of the historical changes in ways of understanding marriage. How might this discussion inform current debates about marriage, specifically gay marriage? How does allowing gay men and lesbians to marry change the ways we think about marriage, and how do those changes compare with changes that have previously occurred in relation to marriage?
- From the institutional approach discussed in this chapter, institutions such as marriage have the power to dictate our behaviors even when we don't necessarily agree with the values reflected in those institutions. Do you agree that institutions have this kind of

power? How else might you explain the persistence of a social phenomenon like the unequal household division of labor even among couples who hold egalitarian values?

- In this chapter, we discussed the important ways in which gender, marriage, and the family are all connected. How would you describe this as a causal relationship? Does gender affect the shape of marriage and families, or does the structure of marriage and families affect the particular gender system in a given society? How could you determine which is the proper direction for this relationship?
- For mothers with disability, their relationship to ideals of motherhood are complicated. What are other marginalized groups who have a complicated relationship to parenting? Also along lines of race, social class, gender identity, and sexual identity, who else might be labelled a "risky parent"?
- Why do you believe many people hold up the idea of a traditional family or the modern marriage as a benchmark against which families or marriages are judged? Are certain forms of family better than others, and why would this be so? How is gender part of the arguments over what makes the ideal family form or the ideal marriage?
- The sexual division of labor and the division of household labor are both good examples of gender differences that seem to lead to gender inequalities. Does this have to be the case? Is a division of labor necessary to society, and what might a division not based on sex category or gender look like? How could you imagine these differences existing without leading to inequality?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. Write an essay in which you describe what the division of household labor was like in your own house growing up. Who did what, and how did everyone seem to feel about it? Were there tensions over who did what tasks? What would be your ideal division of household labor if you were to form your own household?
2. Interview a couple about their division of household labor. You might interview both together or each separately. Come up with an extensive list of all the tasks involved in maintaining a household, and ask your respondents who does each of these tasks on a regular basis. You might also ask them what they feel the ideal division of household labor is and how close their own situation comes to that. How does your interview line up with the research in this chapter?
3. Make a list of all the tasks essential to running and maintaining a household. Include a household with children and one without children. Then investigate how much it would cost to have all of these tasks done by someone in the paid labor force. For example, for laundry, find out how much it would cost to have laundry done by a laundry service, and for cooking, how much it would cost to hire a personal chef. Based on your calculations, how much are the services of someone who labors inside the household worth?

4. What's the relationship between weddings as ceremonies and what we believe about marriage as an institution? Does what happens at weddings reflect our expectations about what will happen when people are married? Do some research on wedding ceremonies. This might involve observing actual wedding ceremonies, doing content analysis of wedding magazines, or gathering information about wedding ceremonies in cross-cultural perspective. What are the gendered implications of wedding ceremonies? Can you use wedding ceremonies to make presumptions about what couples believe about marriage itself?
5. What do weddings that do not involve a heterosexual couple look like? Investigate nontraditional wedding ceremonies. How is gender performed differently in these ceremonies? What do these ceremonies suggest about the connections between marriage and gender?
6. You could argue that one way to measure how much a society values childcare and child-rearing is in how much support its government provides for these activities. Do some research on government policies in different countries pertaining to families, marriage, and childcare. What are the benefits provided by different governments to encourage certain kinds of behavior related to these institutions? For example, in the United States there are tax benefits to be gained through marriage, while in Holland, the government provides a yearly subsidy for all parents for each child they have. Which governments seem more or less family, marriage, and childcare friendly?
7. How does popular culture line up with the idealization of modern marriage and the nuclear family? In this chapter, we discussed some basic statistics reflecting how many people in the United States conform to these two ideals. Do your own research on these demographics. Then, do a content analysis of some popular culture format, focusing on its representation of families and marriage. Do the media accurately reflect the changing reality of marriage and family types?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**National Partnership for Women and Families**

Organization that advocates policies related to women and families, including by lobbying for paid family leave.

www.nationalpartnership.org

**A Better Balance**

Organization that works "to promote equality and expand choices for men and women at all income levels so that they may care for their families without sacrificing their economic security."

www.abetterbalance.org

**Family Equality Council**

National organization that connects, supports, and represents the 3 million parents in this country who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, as well as their 6 million children.

www.familyequality.org

## KEY TERMS

Be a Big Wheel
Companionate marriage
Degendered parenting
Demographics
Diaspora
Doctrine of separate spheres
Dual-earner couples
Exploitation theory of marriage
Family myths
Gendered division of labor
Good provider role
Household division of labor
Intensive mothering
Love marriage
Marriage gradient
Marriage squeeze
The medical stare
Modern marriage
The normalcy project
Nuclear family
Othermothers
Postmodern family
Private sphere
Public sphere
Remittances
Second shift
Sex ratio
Social institutions
Transnational marriages
Transnational motherhood

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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# 9 HOW DOES GENDER AFFECT THE TYPE OF WORK WE DO AND THE REWARDS WE RECEIVE FOR OUR WORK?

## The Gender of Work

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **9.1** Explain why defining what constitutes work can be complex.
- **9.2** Discuss why the demographics of work around the world are difficult to measure.
- **9.3** Understand how masculinity and work are strongly connected.
- **9.4** Contrast the ideas of the glass ceiling and the glass escalator.
- **9.5** List examples of typically sex-segregated occupations.
- **9.6** Summarize theories that explain why the gender wage gap exists.
- **9.7** Explain what transgender men's experiences in the workplace can tell us about sex segregation.
- **9.8** Discuss some possible solutions to the gender wage gap.

What did you want to be when you grew up? Do you think your answer to that question or the way people reacted to your answer was connected to your gender? Did anyone ever tell you that you couldn't be what you wanted because of your gender? How do certain jobs get defined in more or less gendered ways? Are men more invested in a high-paying job, and why would that be?

What are the differences in what women and men are paid? How have those differences changed over time, and how do we explain those differences? Does gender influence the types of jobs for which we think men or women are better suited? How does gender impact how well people do in the jobs they have, including their likelihood of being promoted or getting a raise? Does gender have an impact on who gets hired for a job? What would a workplace without gender look like?

These are the questions we explore in this chapter on gender and the world of work, another important institution where gender is enacted, helping to create and reinforce our ideas about what gender is. As the preceding questions reveal, determining exactly what we're talking about

with a focus on work is not an easy task. In the last chapter, we discussed the important historical development within Anglo-European societies of the separation of spheres. The separation of spheres is important to our consideration of both family and work because it sets up a fundamental division between these two realms of social life, and this has important gendered implications for the world of work. The separation of spheres affected families by removing some aspects of productive work from within the house. The doctrine of separate spheres affected work in Anglo-European societies by creating a whole new sphere that largely did not exist before: the workplace as separate and distinct from the home. In this way, the separation of spheres forever changed the way many people in the world thought about work. Work became something done largely by men, outside the house, for pay. What happened to all the many other tasks that are done by women, inside the home, or for no pay?

## WHAT IS WORK?

Take the example of Haruko, a wife and mother in Bessho, a rural farming community in Japan (Conway-Turner & Cherrin, 1998). Haruko described herself as "just a housewife" who had a lot of free time, but anthropologist Gail Lee Bernstein (1993) observed Haruko, like many other women in her village, laboring side by side with men in the rice paddies, weeding, transplanting, and harvesting. Haruko called this work "helping her husband" rather than "work" because Haruko was not paid for her labor in the field. As far as the abundance of free time Haruko had, Bernstein (1993) described the daily work life of this Japanese housewife:

> Haruko's daily round of chores began at six o'clock. Every morning she prepared a breakfast of *mososhira*, boiled rice, and green tea. After sending the children off to school at eight o'clock in a flurry of last-minute searches for clothing and books and hastily delivered instruction, Haruko ran a load of wash in the washing machine and hung it out to dry. As the woman of the house, Haruko also had several community obligations that were impossible to shirk.
>
> In addition to being a homemaker, Haruko was the family's chief farm worker. Haruko also worked with her mother-in-law and husband on a neighborhood team husking rice. One of Haruko's principal farm chores was feeding pigs. Twice a day, once in the morning and once at night, the couple fed the ninety pigs and cleaned the pigsty.
>
> By early November, Haruko usually looked for part-time wage-paying jobs. Haruko was taken on as a *dokata*, or construction worker (literally a "mud person"), and she worked on a team with two other women and three men. In most other wage-paying jobs women and men worked apart, at distinct kinds of work, but on the construction teams they worked side by side. The female *dokata*'s work was physically demanding: women hauled heavy boulders, climbed down into trenches to lay irrigation pipes, constructed bridges over irrigation ditches, and shoveled snow from steep mountain slopes. (pp. 226–229)

Some of the things Haruko did may seem somewhat foreign to women outside her particular cultural context. If you asked most people in the United States to guess the gender of a

construction worker (which is essentially what a dokata is), their safest bet would probably be a man. In fact, some people in the United States might tell you that construction work is a job that men are inherently better suited for based on their belief in men's greater overall strength. Yet Haruko, and many women like her around the world, move boulders, lay irrigation pipes, and shovel snow—largely without the aid of the modern implements that reduce the amount of physical strength necessary for these tasks in places like the United States. The case of Haruko begins to reveal the ways in which our sense of how certain jobs are gendered may be a product of our own cultural biases.

The labor for which Haruko is *not* paid may sound more familiar to the experiences of those from Anglo-European societies. Certainly, many women prepare breakfast and do laundry, even if fewer women (and people in general) are responsible for many of the farm tasks included in Haruko's round of daily chores. Are doing the laundry, making sure children are prepared to go to school, feeding pigs, or husking rice somehow less important than the work Haruko's husband does in the paid labor force? Why is Haruko's work not really considered work, even by Haruko herself, who describes herself as *just a housewife*?

Haruko's story is typical of women around the world, not necessarily in the specific tasks she performs (not everyone has pigs to feed) but in the amount of work she does, in the many work roles she occupies, and in the devaluation of all her tasks as not really work (Conway-Turner & Cherrin, 1998). We begin with Haruko's case to make an important point in our ongoing examination of work. Many ways of accounting for work and discussing work within the social sciences have historically ignored the lives of people like Haruko. If we want to examine the relationships between gender and work, we must first make sure we become aware of the gender biases already there as soon as we use the word *work*.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of other examples of hidden work that is performed by women and not usually perceived as work?*

## MEASURING THE WORLD'S WORK

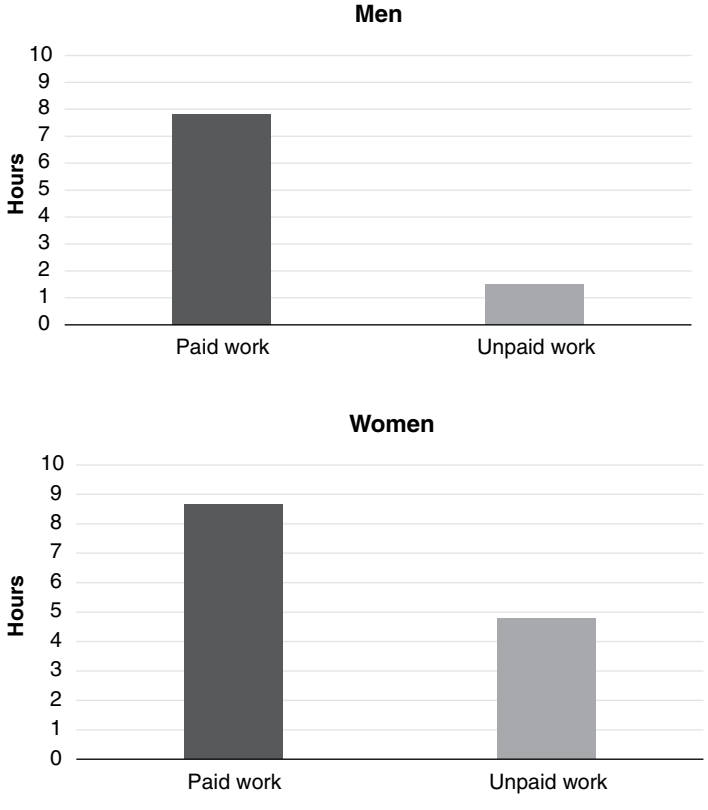
The difficulty in deciding exactly what constitutes work makes it hard to do simple things like measure who works around the world and exactly how much work they do. On a global level, organizations like the United Nations and the International Labour Organization are interested in measuring the amount and kinds of work done by people in different countries, and the statistics they produce can have important implications for decisions about who receives much-needed international aid. Some evidence indicates an important link between the economic growth of a country or region and the employment rates of women, and this makes measuring the amount of work done by women an important task (International Labour Office, 2008).

Initially, many of the statistics collected by international organizations like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund simply excluded the work women did outside the paid labor market. This meant that most of the work Haruko did on a daily basis was not accounted for in these numbers. If her construction work had included some kind of legal contract, an hourly wage or salary, or some kind of paycheck from which taxes were taken (meaning that the income was reported to the government), then this would be formal paid labor. But much of the labor that takes place around the world is **informal labor**, which means there is no legal contract for the work, there is not necessarily a set hourly wage or salary, and none of the income is reported to the government by the employer or employee. Women are far more likely, worldwide, to be employed in the informal labor market than are men, so there's a strong chance that Haruko's part-time position as a construction worker still did not include her in the official statistics once collected by the United Nations.

Figure 9.1 highlights some key facts about women and men's work globally.

Expanding the ways in which we define work to include a wide range of activities is important in that it begins to dismantle our gendered notions of work as something primarily done by

**FIGURE 9.1 ■ Work**




*Source:* Data from Bello, I. (2019). Women, ergonomics and repetitiveness. In edited by Bankole Fasanya & IntechOpen (Eds.), *Safety and health for workers—research and practical perspective*. CC BY, 10.5772/intechopen.82065

adult men. In fact, much of the world would come to a grinding halt if we tried to survive solely on the labor of adult men. But on a global scale, there are important differences in the kinds of economic activity in which women and men are engaged. The types of economic activity women are more likely to be engaged in are less secure and often increase women's vulnerability.

In the United States, 92% of domestic workers are women, and 57% are Black, Hispanic, Asian American, or Pacific Islander (Garbes, 2022). Of the 76 million domestic workers worldwide, 76% are women (International Labor Organization, 2021). The number of domestic workers is increasing in developing countries. Working behind closed doors, almost 30% of women doing domestic work are deprived of labor rights, while more than half of them are not entitled to earn the minimum wage. This domestic work includes the work Haruko does to help her husband in the rice fields and to care for the family pigs. Worldwide, women working in the informal sector include women like Cherifa, a woman in Tunisia who began selling pastries to friends and family members when her husband squandered her family inheritance (El Amouri Institute, 1993). Cherifa makes the pastries out of her own home, and although one of her sons has set up a shop selling the same pastries and paying taxes, Cherifa neither counts her money nor reports income from what is her own business. In Colombia, women like Auntie Donkor and Madam Faustina participate in the informal economy and support their families by illegally selling foodstuffs like fish and produce at a market in the city (Okine, 1993). They cannot afford the taxes and fees required to sell food legally at the market, so they sell after 4 p.m., when the police are less likely to see them, and establish a network of customers who know where to find them. Like Cherifa, both of these women support their families through the income they gain from informal activities.

The activities of these women are considered **vulnerable employment** for several reasons, including the basic fact that these jobs are lower paid overall relative to jobs in the formal economy. One household member working a job in the informal economy will find it difficult to raise his or her family out of poverty on that one income, and this is an especially troubling fact in much of the developing world. When most jobs are in the low-paying informal economy, moving vast numbers of families out of poverty in the global South becomes a nearly impossible task. These types of employment make women and their families vulnerable to falling into or remaining in poverty.

But because they are in the informal economy, they also make women vulnerable in other ways. Those working in the informal economy are less likely to have access to basic social services while being more likely to fall prey to illness, property loss, disability, and death. Because they are not *officially* employed in the informal economy, workers in the informal economy are not eligible for or cannot afford the very things that help to buffer the effects of these life events, like health insurance, home insurance, life insurance, and disability insurance.

Not surprisingly, then, those in the informal economy have lower levels of health, education, and longevity relative to their counterparts in the formal economy. They experience fewer of the rights and benefits that come with employment and are therefore often cut out of the very decision-making processes in government or marketing institutions that might help to improve their situation. For example, organizing a union in the world of the informal labor market is difficult, and this leaves these workers with limited options for improving their working conditions or pay. Within the government, informal workers are not acknowledged as officially employed, and this affects their status relative to government institutions.

Given these disadvantages of working in the informal economy and women's concentration worldwide within these jobs, it's safe to say that many women are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to the work they do. On top of that, add the fact that no country keeps track of the "housework" that women do in their calculations of economic activity. When you hear figures about the gross domestic product (GDP) or gross national product (GNP) of a country, this does not include the hours and hours of work necessary for caring for children and maintaining a household done by family members, unless that activity generates income for the family.

Does changing dirty diapers generate income for a family? Not according to national statistics, but it is a task that has to be done to reproduce a new generation of children—and if there were not someone in the family doing this task for no pay, someone would have to be paid to do it. Almost all the tasks that fall under the umbrella term of *housework* can be and often are outsourced to someone outside the family. Even what we think of as the highly emotional and intimate job of raising children has historically and sometimes continues to be done by employees not related to the children: nannies, babysitters, and au pairs. A person who does all these jobs for free within the family is saving the household a great deal of money and so contributing to the family's income.

In the United States, the monthly cost of childcare in a center-based facility is $1,230, which adds up to $14,760 per year. For in-family childcare, the cost is $800 per month. On average, a family who makes the state median income has to spend 18% of their income on childcare for an infant and 13% for a toddler (Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2018). Mothers who have never been married spend 23% of their income on childcare relative to married mothers, who spend 9%. The poorest families spend up to 35% of their income on childcare (Malik, 2019). Why are these activities, then, treated as if they exist outside the real economy when they are done by family members?

The simplest answer is that work has become a deeply gendered institution. Just as the world of the family is presumed to be a feminine domain, work is considered to be the territory of men. This ideology is so strong that it makes the work that women do around the world largely invisible. Their work is not counted in official statistics gathered by international and national organizations (Bonvilliain, 2007). The role of women in determining the distribution of economic resources within families is often ignored and subsumed under the larger unit of the household without analyzing the complex gender dynamics that take place within any given household. As we've discussed with women like Haruko, women themselves often do not consider what they do work but merely as helping their husband or being a housewife and mother.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*What would happen if women (and other people) around the world demanded to be paid for the labor they currently do for free? What would a world look like in which whoever does the childcare and housework in your family had to be paid for that labor? How would the ways in which we think about work be different?*

Given all these realities, it is important at the beginning of this chapter to point to the ways in which much of the world's work currently is and always has been done by women. The story we explore later in this chapter about the increasing labor force participation among women in many Anglo-European cultures is just one particular narrative about women's relationship to work. This story suggests that women working is a relatively new and novel phenomenon, but to tell the story in that way ignores the many other kinds of work women have always done and continue to do around the world.

## A MAN'S JOB: MASCULINITY AND WORK

Although much of the work that women do is ignored or made invisible, work becomes, for men, an unspoken expectation that is often perceived as defining the very core of a man's identity. In almost any industrialized society, adult men are expected to have jobs, and any deviation from this expected course of events is viewed as not just a personal failing on the part of the man but also as a failure of his masculinity. A man who is successful in the world of work is perceived as successful at the all-important task of being a man. Thus, in places like the United States, we follow the dictum, the "bigger the paycheck," the "bigger the man" (Gould, 1974, p. 99). This lines up with the dictum of contemporary manhood we discussed in the last chapter: that men should "Be a Big Wheel."

To demonstrate the particular power that work has in men's lives, we need only look at what happens to men who do not work or men whose work does not provide the kind of status derived from having a big paycheck. A wealth of sociological research demonstrates what happens to men with work lives characterized by various kinds of failure, whether that means actual unemployment or working-class jobs that do not provide the kind of status associated with high-paying, high-status careers (Liebow, 1967; Rubin, 1976, 1994). These failures in their work lives affect other relationships, souring friendships, placing a strain on relations between husbands and wives, and altering patterns of fatherhood. One unemployed machinist in Lillian Rubin's (1994) study of working-class families described it this way:

> When you get laid off, it's like you lose a part of yourself. It's terrible; something goes out of you. Then, on top of that, by staying home and not going to work and associating with people of your own level, you begin to lose the sharpness you developed at work. Everything gets slower; you move slower; your mind works slower. (p. 110)

As Rubin (1994) pointed out in her study, when you ask most men to tell you about their identities, they are most likely to first describe their job or what they do for a living. Some women, and probably increasing numbers of them, will also mention their jobs, but Rubin argued that a woman's work identity is still situated within a more complex set of competing interests, including her family obligations. For men, work is connected to the very core of their selves, and it's therefore not surprising that men who lose their jobs feel as if they have lost a part of who they are.

In her study, Rubin (1994) detailed the sense of loss and helplessness experienced by men who have lost their jobs, largely as a result of layoffs. Some of these men are afraid to sit still and start doing things around the house for fear that they'll never get up again or feel that they have not earned the "right" to sit still anymore since they are no longer employed. Although they are

generally part of mass layoffs, and so are the victims of larger economic trends in society, they still often blame themselves and try to figure out what they could have done differently to keep their jobs. Men facing unemployment describe having lost not just a job but also a whole way of life, as many of their friendships were grounded in work experiences. These men often become violent or turn to alcohol to deal with feelings of loss and depression resulting from their unemployment. Children describe their fathers as suddenly always mad about something and therefore unapproachable. Even the sexual lives of these men are affected as a result of the anxiety, fear, anger, and depression that begin to characterize their lives.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 9.1

### MEET THE PARENTS

The importance of a man's job to his identity is demonstrated to comic effect in the film *Meet the Parents*, starring Ben Stiller and Robert De Niro. In this film, Ben Stiller's character, Gaylord "Greg" Focker, meets his former CIA father-in-law Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro) and acts out many of the common anxieties experienced by heterosexual men meeting their future in-laws. Consistent with the doctrine of separate spheres and the good provider role, many of these anxieties center around the career and economic prospects of the future son-in-law. In *Meet the Parents*, these issues are crystallized in Greg's job: male nurse. The first scene of the movie plays on the novelty of Greg's profession as we see him rehearsing his marriage proposal to his girlfriend with a patient in a hospital who mistakes him for the doctor. Later in the movie, Greg's future mother-in-law mistakes triage for a job that's "better than a nurse," while his future father-in-law, Jack, notes the absence of many men in Greg's profession. When Greg meets two friends of the family who are doctors, he's introduced as being "in medicine." When he clarifies that he's a nurse, both male doctors laugh, assuming he's making a joke. Later, his fiancée's ex-boyfriend assumes that Greg does male nursing as charity work rather than as his paid job. The plot of the movie hinges on a claim Greg makes about his performance on his MCATs, the exam used to gain entrance to medical school. Greg says he did very well on the MCAT and decided not to become a doctor because he wanted more interaction with his patients. Jack, as former CIA, uses his connections to investigate Greg's claims and initially concludes that Greg is lying because no Greg Focker is registered as having taken the MCAT. It is eventually revealed that *Gaylord* Focker did do well on the MCATs, and so Greg and Jack come to a grudging acceptance of each other. Besides being funny, *Meet the Parents* reveals a great deal about the intersections among jobs, money, prestige, and masculinity. That he's a male nurse isn't the only reason Greg's father-in-law finds him suspect as a husband for his daughter, but throughout the movie, it lowers Greg's status in countless interactions and makes him an easy object of ridicule. What's more, the movie suggests the ways in which Greg's status as a male nurse is perceived as a sign of potential failure (he wasn't smart enough to be a doctor) rather than as an intentional decision. Would a future daughter-in-law's status as a nurse be called into question in the same way? Would the premise of *Meet the Parents* work if the gender of the main character were changed? Are women judged on the basis of their careers or jobs in the same way that men are? And if not, what criteria would be used to judge the suitability of a future wife for one's son?

## When Men Can't Work: Masculinity and Disability

Because work and masculinity are so deeply interconnected, it's stressful for men who find themselves temporarily out of work. The interconnection also affects men with disabilities who may find themselves either excluded from work altogether or negotiating work with a disability.

Conventional wisdom suggests that even the phrase "disabled man" is a self-contradiction. Men, by definition, are supposed to be able, strong, and powerful (Lakoff, 1989). Because of these assumptions about what it means to be masculine, men with disabilities may struggle in multiple areas of life, including in the workplace. In one study of masculinity and physical disability in the lives of 10 men, researchers found that those men who ascribed to conventional ideas of masculinity felt the need to demonstrate physical strength, athleticism, sexual prowess, and independence. Their self-image relied on seeing themselves as heroes and risk takers, but they were often frustrated by their limitations in being able to do what they wanted and go where they wanted. Men who rejected the most standard view of masculinity instead emphasized their relationships rather than individual accomplishments (Gerschick & Miller, 1994).

How do disability and masculinity interact in the workplace specifically? People with disabilities in the United States in general are underemployed compared to the rest of the labor market. While 67.1% of Americans without disabilities are either employed or actively looking for work, that figure is only 21.3% for those with disabilities (National Organization on Disability, 2022). When employed, those with disabilities are less to likely find themselves in management, professional, and related occupations as compared to those without disabilities.

Research on the connections between gender, disability and work tell us that disability has a greater impact on masculinity than it does on other identities (such as femininity), because masculinity is continually tested and in need of proving (Ostrander, 2008). Remember hegemonic masculinity as a theory tells us that ideal forms of masculinity are impossible to obtain, but power is distributed based on how close to that ideal men come. Men with disabilities become an example of marginalized masculinity, excluded from the patriarchal dividend, or the benefits that come with conforming to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

One of the qualities of hegemonic masculinity in many settings is its emphasis on independence and autonomy. A real man is an island and certainly doesn't need any help. But men with disabilities may require assistance and find it difficult to create a life with the necessary levels of independence and autonomy (Shuttleworth et al., 2015). Demonstrating their marginalized status, men with disabilities in the workplace are being seen as possessing feminized traits like helplessness (Mik-Meyer, 2015). Though most of existing research focuses on physical disabilities, there's evidence that similar dynamics apply to intellectual or developmental disabilities such as autism, especially in presenting a barrier to getting a job (Cheslack-Postava & Jordan-Young, 2012).

In one study of women and men with hidden impairments employed in the transport industry in the United Kingdom, researchers found some barriers were faced by people with disabilities regardless of gender (Sang et al., 2016). Women and men reported difficulties in finding employment posed by filling out applications (for those with dyslexia). Once employed, chances for advancement were stymied by skills-based tests, which people with disabilities might require extra time to complete. Being unable to complete certain tasks due to their disabilities resulted in demotion or loss of employment.

Research on how men get ahead in the workplace tells us that one mechanism is gendered work practices that restrict certain tasks to men. If one of the key areas used to make decisions about promotion is performance in a certain area and women are prevented from working in that area, it results in a disadvantage. Because their disability restricts the tasks that men with disabilities can perform, they don't have access to this particular path to promotion and advancement.

Homosociality is another key to the advantages many men experience, especially in male-dominated workspaces. Homosociality is the continuum of cooperative relations between people of the same gender. In the workplace, men's informal interactions are often important to their ability to move up the ladder. Hanging out in the breakroom or having a drink after work can be as useful as actual job performance. Again, men with disabilities find it difficult to engage in this informal socializing. They may experience difficulty in participating in the particular type of humor that often characterizes these interactions. Or they may fear finding themselves the object of jokes rather than participants.

All of these examples demonstrate the ways in which work and masculinity are connected and the ways in which the relationship between gender and work are not uniform across different groups in any given society. Work can be an important source of status for men, but when these opportunities are blocked, the content of what it means to be masculine can change and shift to reflect the particular social context of that group. This reminds us again that part of our quest in understanding gender is not to identify the norm or standard in terms of how gender is lived but, rather, to identify which particular definition of gender has the most power in society. The particular relationship in which masculinity becomes an important source of status and identity may not be true of most men around the world, and even if it is, that is not to say that this is the normal relationship between work and masculinity. What is true is that gaining status through work is a task most easily achieved by men in powerful positions, which, in the United States, generally means able-bodied, white, upper-class, heterosexual men.

## Men in Predominantly Female Occupations

One last example of the ways in which the work a man does and the status he occupies can be connected comes from research on men in predominantly female occupations. These cases demonstrate the ways in which the status of any particular job or career is determined not just by how much the job pays or how much authority and prestige is gained from the job but also from what kind of people generally do the job. Jobs done primarily by women tend to be perceived as lower status, especially for men in these occupations. For example, the daily tasks performed by a general practitioner doctor and a nurse practitioner are not that different, as the increasing prevalence of nurse practitioners in the United States demonstrates. Yet doctors, who are still predominantly male, have higher status (and higher pay) than predominantly female nurse practitioners. Historically, as women enter a particular occupation or field in large numbers, the status associated with that occupation decreases, along with the compensation. How does working in a predominantly female occupation affect the status and overall identity of men?

Christine Williams (1991, 1992) studied both men in predominantly female occupations and women in predominantly male occupations. Focusing on men's experiences in

predominantly female occupations such as librarian, elementary school teacher, nurse, and social worker, Williams found that white men in those jobs faced little discrimination within their jobs, either in their hiring or from their coworkers once they were on the job. For heterosexual men in occupations such as librarian or elementary school teacher, they often found a distinct advantage in being able to bond with other males in their work environment, and these other males were often in supervisory positions.

Gay men in these occupations were sometimes forced to disguise their sexuality, in part by exaggerating acceptable "masculine" qualities. For example, one male physician stated that he preferred all male nurses in his operating room unless the male nurses were gay. In general, white, straight men in predominantly female occupations face little hostility from their female counterparts. Although they are sometimes forced to take care of the more "masculine" tasks associated with their jobs, like discipline cases in elementary schools, on the whole, the men Williams interviewed found their female coworkers to be supportive of their careers and eager to have men enter their fields. Although men often felt uncomfortable in these settings, their female coworkers often went as far as to include the men in social gatherings of coworkers, including bridal showers and baby showers.

Within the actual workplace environment, then, these white, straight men receive something of a status boost from being one of the few men in a predominantly female occupation. The stigmatization of a man working as a nurse or librarian comes largely from the world outside work for these men—from patients, parents, and clients as well as from friends, family members, acquaintances, and strangers. From these sources, men receive messages that male nurses are gay, male librarians are wimpy and asexual, and male social workers are feminine and passive, while male elementary school teachers are suspected of being pedophiles.

The principal of one male elementary school teacher shared the following concerns expressed by the parents of one student: "How can he love my child; he's a man?" and "Aren't you concerned about homosexuality?" (Williams, 1992, p. 261). Another male elementary school teacher described the reaction he gets from other men when he tells them what he does for a living: "If I tell men that I don't know, that I'm meeting for the first time, that that's what I do . . . sometimes there's a look on their faces that, you know, 'Oh, couldn't get a real job'" (Williams, 1992, p. 262). This male teacher's wife, who was also an elementary school teacher, was perceived by her husband as receiving an increase in status from the fact that she worked at all, while the specific nature of his job decreased his status in the eyes of other men. Most of the men Williams (1992) interviewed felt that to outsiders, their job represented a distinct step down in status, and this may be part of the reason there are so few men in these occupations. Doing work that is labeled as women's work makes it more difficult for men to make the connection between the status derived from a job and masculinity.

## THE GLASS CEILING AND THE GLASS ESCALATOR

One of the most important concepts that came out of Williams's (1991, 1992) work on men in predominantly female occupations was the idea of the glass escalator. To understand the glass escalator, we have to first understand the glass ceiling. The **glass ceiling** refers to the fact that despite the

progress women have made into many managerial positions in the business world, they are still far less likely than men to have jobs that involve exercising authority over people and resources (Wharton, 2005). The glass ceiling is often described as invisible and unbreakable, and it serves as a useful metaphor in describing the experiences of both women and people of color in attempting to obtain positions of power and authority both inside and outside the business world.

Hillary Clinton used the glass ceiling as a metaphor in her speech conceding the U.S. Democratic presidential nomination when she said, "Although we weren't able to shatter that highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you, it's got 18 million cracks in it" (Milbank, 2008). Women's blocked opportunities to positions of authority often also translate into an inability to climb beyond a certain point in the corporate ladder and, therefore, into an inability to achieve a certain level of earnings or to penetrate certain occupations or types of jobs (Cotter et al., 2001). Although the glass ceiling is sometimes also used to describe the situation of people of color in the corporate world, it is largely a term for women's experiences in male-dominated business settings.

The glass escalator identified by Williams describes the experiences of some men when they enter occupations predominantly held by women. Do they face the same set of disadvantages described by the metaphor of the glass ceiling? Initially, Williams's research suggested that white, cisgender men in female occupations face little job discrimination when it comes to their hiring, and they often enjoy a preference based on their gender. Librarians described a preference for hiring males over females, while male elementary teachers talked about how marketable they were because of their gender. One pediatric nurse was told by the supervisor who hired him that it was nice to have a man around in such a female-dominated occupation. Once these men were hired for the job, they were often tracked into certain areas or specialties in large part because of gender expectations.

In Williams's research, male social workers, elementary teachers, and nurses were all tracked toward administrative jobs more than their female counterparts were, often regardless of whether they expressed an actual interest in doing administrative work. This is what Williams (1992) called the **glass escalator**, the invisible pressure men in these occupations face to move upward in their professions. On the glass escalator, men in these specific professions had to work extra hard just to stay in the same place and to resist the pressure from their superiors, coworkers, and others to move up in their career.

The example of one librarian in Williams's (1992) study demonstrates how the pressure of the glass escalator works on some men in female-dominated occupations. This particular public librarian specialized in children's collections, a heavily female-dominated specialty within a career already populated primarily by women. In his evaluation for his first job, his supervisors were happy with his work in storytelling and other activities related to the children's collection, but they critiqued him in his evaluation for "not shooting high enough" (Williams, 1992, p. 257). These negative reactions to his desire to remain where he was, as a librarian in the children's collection rather than as an administrator, followed him through his 10-year career. Some men appreciate being given a ride on the glass escalator, but others, like this children's librarian, would actually prefer not to do administrative work.

Williams noticed in her original research that the glass escalator didn't work for all men. Gay men and men of color didn't receive the same benefits as their white, straight counterparts. Adia Harvey Wingfield (2009) further examined the experiences of Black men with the glass

escalator in her own research. The Black male nurses in her study were far from welcomed into the profession by their female colleagues. Instead, they dealt with outright hostility, like the Black male nurse who was told by his female colleagues to sit somewhere else during their breaks. When he attempted to sit with his female colleagues, they got up and left the table.

Rather than being seen as more skilled, Black men in predominately female occupations were viewed as less skilled than women and often overlooked for promotions rather than fast-tracked. White male nurses reported being mistaken for doctors, but the Black men in Wingfield's study were more likely to be mistaken for orderlies or janitors. Even the patients who knew these Black men were nurses treated the men with suspicion. One Black male nurse with 17 years of experience, Cyril, was told outright by the white husband of his patient that he didn't want Cyril giving his wife a shot as a Black man. Older white women would say they didn't want Black male nurses touching them. While white male nurses were seen as having "leadership" potential, Black male nurses were perceived as "menacing." At least in the predominantly white female settings Harvey Wingfield researched, there was no glass escalator for Black male nurses.

Catherine Connell's (2012) research on gay and lesbian teachers in California and Texas reveals that the glass escalator does not function for gay men, either. In schools where levels of homophobia are high and, in fact, institutionalized, LGBTQ teachers experience pressure to "pass" so that no attention is drawn to their sexuality. For gay men, this involved avoiding the use of certain mannerisms or expressions identified as gay in the classroom setting. Lesbian teachers felt pressure to wear makeup and defer to male authority. Even in places where legal protections were in place for LGBTQ teachers, a culture of homonormativity dominated. This meant that gay and lesbian teachers were accepted as long as they conformed to conventional gender practices. In other words, it was okay to be lesbian or gay as long as lesbian and gay teachers didn't violate any gender norms as part of the identities. Under these circumstances, it's difficult to believe that any glass escalator exists for gay male teachers. The glass escalator, then, is a phenomenon that seems limited mostly to white, straight men.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*How does the concept of androcentrism connect to the idea of the glass ceiling or the glass escalator? What about the idea of gender polarization?*

## SEX SEGREGATION IN THE WORKPLACE

The phenomena of both the glass escalator and the glass ceiling raise a more fundamental question about the relationship between gender and work: How do occupations such as social worker, nurse, elementary school teacher, and librarian become predominantly female in the first place? And why are some other occupations and jobs decidedly male, like CEO of a large corporation or U.S. senator? In Chapter 8, we already discussed the sexual division of labor, a very old and

universal way of dividing all kinds of tasks in a society—a concept that covers all the kinds of work people do on a daily basis around the world, including taking care of children, caring for crops, and writing memos or fetching coffee. The household division of labor covers the way in which people in a family divide up the tasks necessary to keep a household running and is something that makes sense only with the separation of spheres and a clear division between the work that takes place outside the house and the work that takes place inside the house.

When we shift our focus specifically to the world of paid work within the formal economy, a new gendered division emerges—occupational sex segregation. **Sex segregation** refers to the concentration of women and men into different jobs, occupations, and firms (Wharton, 2005). Sex segregation in general is something that exists to varying degrees in many cultures around the world; in the United States, we use sex segregation for most public bathrooms and locker rooms (although interestingly, we do not sex-segregate the private bathrooms in our homes). In some cultures, sex segregation is enforced within the family home, as women are secluded in certain rooms or certain parts of the house while men are confined to others. When we use sex segregation here, we are focusing specifically on the ways in which not just physical spaces but whole career paths become dominated by either women or men.

You might think that in places like the United States, with programs such as affirmative action in place to redress past discrimination against women and people of color, occupational segregation should largely be a thing of the past. Some of the questions with which we began this chapter had to do with the aspirations you might have had as a child and whether anyone encouraged or discouraged you based on your gender. Surely, we live in a time in which all little girls are told they can be whatever they want to be, and the same is true for little boys. Or is it? The rates of occupational sex segregation (as well as occupational segregation by race) are still considerably high in the United States, and they have become a part of the taken-for-granted landscape of our everyday lives. In the United States, fewer than 10% of workers have a coworker or colleague of a different gender who does the same job, for the same employer, in the same location, on the same shift.

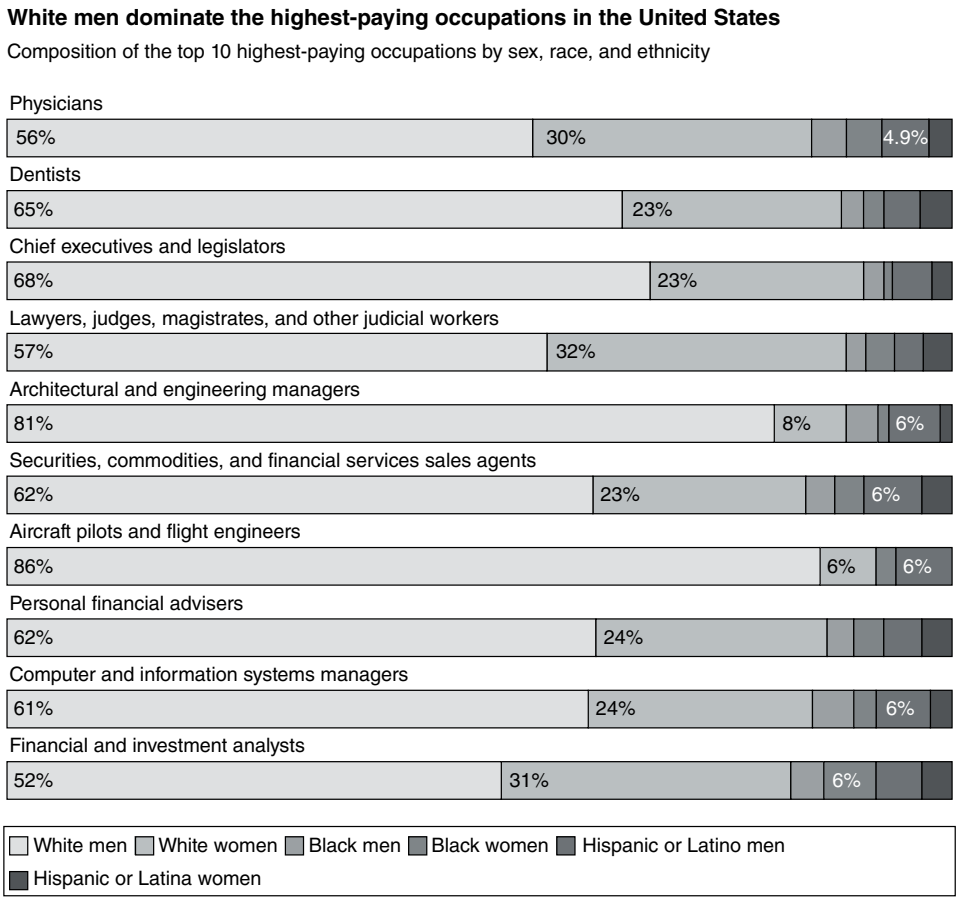
This statistic begins to point to the complexity of sex segregation in the workplace and to the many levels at which sex segregation exists. Women and men can be segregated by the particular shifts they work (graveyard or day shift), the locations in which they are placed (branch office or headquarters), and the employer for whom they work (cashier at Walmart as opposed to cashier for a locally owned health food market) as well as the seemingly simplistic notion of the actual job they do. When you throw all these complex factors together, very few women and men work alongside people of a different gender who are doing exactly the same work. Many of us have a sense that there are large numbers of women in the paid workforce in the United States, but how are those women actually distributed across jobs, occupations, and firms?

Of the 66 million women in the United States who do paid work, 30% of them work in just 10 out of the 503 occupations listed in the U.S. Census. Another way of saying this is that a third of all women in the United States who work are concentrated in just 10 out of the myriad occupations supposedly available to them (England, 2010). Adding race to the picture reveals that 18% of Latinx women work in one of five occupations, which pay an average of $23,196, while 14% of white men work in five occupations with an average salary of $59,670. Fifty-one percent of Asian American or Pacific Islander women work as manicurists, earning on average $21,228 per year (Zhavoronkova et al., 2022).

Figures 9.2 and 9.3 look at the most common occupations for white men, men of color, and women, highlighting the pay differences.

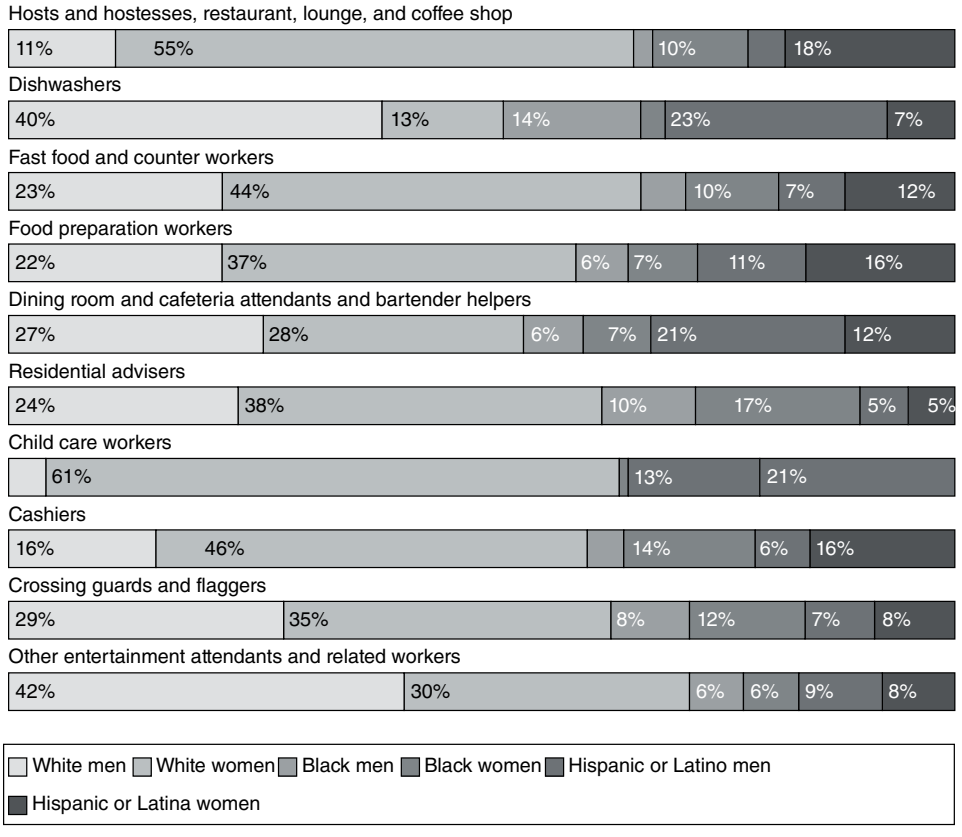
These figures may be hard to believe, although you can try them out for yourself by looking at Table 9.1, which lists rates of sex segregation by selected occupations. Most of us don't spend a lot of time thinking about the prevalence of sex segregation in occupations until someone points it out to us, partly because, in the complex, bureaucratic world of today's society, it's sometimes hard to figure out exactly who does what. But to put these numbers into context, you need only begin to think about all the types of workplaces you encounter and to reconstruct what you know about the gender of the people in those settings and the kinds of jobs they're doing. If you're a regular at a particular restaurant or coffee shop, is there a gender pattern to who is more likely to be serving your food and who is more likely to be preparing it?

**FIGURE 9.2 ■ White Men Dominate the Highest-Paying Occupations in the United States**




*Source:* This figure was published by the Center for American Progress. (2022, March 29). Occupational segregation in America. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/occupational-segregation-in-america/

**FIGURE 9.3 ■ Men of Color and Women Dominate the Lowest-Paying Occupations in the United States**




*Source:* This figure was published by the Center for American Progress. (2022, March 29). Occupational segregation in America. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/occupational-segregation-in-america/

Think about all the teachers you had throughout your school career, from kindergarten all the way up to your current classroom. How many male teachers did you have in elementary school or throughout your whole educational career? What kinds of subjects did those male teachers tend to teach? Who worked in your school libraries, or who works in the public libraries you may go to? How many doctors have you encountered who were women, and what kind of doctors were they? What was the gender of the person who sold you your car, computer, shoes, or clothes? Is a man or a woman more likely to be the person cashing your check at the bank,

**TABLE 9.1 ■ Sex Segregation by Occupation and the Gender Wage Gap for Selected Occupations, 2021**

| Occupation | Percentage Women | Gender Wage Gap |
|---|---|---|
| *Management Occupations* | 52% | 0.83 |
| Chief executives | 29.1% | 0.70 |
| Food service managers | 48.5% | 0.78 |
| Financial managers | 54.6% | 0.73 |
| Computer and information systems managers | 26.7% | 0.89 |
| *Legal Occupations* | 53.5% | 0.60 |
| Lawyers | 37.9% | 0.77 |
| Paralegals and legal assistants | 84.8% | .87 |
| *Health Care Practitioners and Technical Occupations* | 74.3% | 0.80 |
| Dentists | 38.7% | * |
| Pharmacists | 57.8% | 1.03 |
| Physical therapists | 66.9% | .95 |
| Surgeons | 27.7% | * |
| Other physicians | 39.7% | 0.86 |
| Physician's assistants | 64.4% | * |
| Registered nurses | 86.7% | 0.89 |
| Veterinarians | 64.2% | * |
| Dental hygienists | 95.1% | * |
| *Education, Training, and Library Occupations* | 73.7% | 0.80 |
| Preschool and kindergarten teachers | 96.8% | * |
| Elementary and middle school teachers | 79.2% | 0.87 |
| Secondary school teachers | 59.5% | 0.91 |
| *Life, Physical, and Social Science Occupations* | 47.4% | 0.90 |
| *Community and Social Service Occupations* | 67.5% | 0.87 |
| Social workers | 83.6% | 0.85 |

(*Continued*)

**TABLE 9.1 ■ Sex Segregation by Occupation and the Gender Wage Gap for Selected Occupations, 2021 (*Continued*)**

| Occupation | Percentage Women | Gender Wage Gap |
|---|---|---|
| Clergy | 537% | * |
| *Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media Occupations* | 50.0% | 0.87 |
| Coaches and scouts | 44.3% | * |
| Writers and authors | 63.7% | * |
| *Protective Service Occupations* | 23.8% | 0.76 |
| Police officers | 15.3% | 0.96 |
| Firefighters | 5.1% | * |
| *Food Preparation and Serving-Related Occupations* | 54.6% | 0.89 |
| Chefs and head cooks | 22.8% | 0.90 |
| Cooks | 40.2% | 0.84 |
| Bartenders | 57.4% | 0.88 |
| Waiters and waitresses | 68.2% | 0.87 |
| *Construction and Extraction Occupations* | 3.9% | 0.79 |
| Construction laborers | 4.5% | * |
| Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters | 2.1% | * |
| Brickmasons, blockmasons, and stonemasons | 2.2% | * |
| *Sales and Office Occupations* | 61.5% | 0.79 |
| Secretaries and administrative assistants | 92.5% | 0.80 |

*Source*: Based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table 39. Median weekly earnings of full-time and salary workers by detailed occupation and sex, and Table 11. Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity.

* Data are not shown where base (number of people in that category) is less than 50,000. This means that for these particular occupations, there are not more than 50,000 women or more than 50,000 men in that occupation.

changing the oil in your car, doing your dry cleaning, preparing your taxes, renewing your driver's license, delivering your mail, or pulling you over for a speeding ticket?

Sex segregation is easy to see in some occupations. Few of us have probably had a female police officer give us a ticket; only 15% of police officers in the United States in 2021 were women. In other settings, the degree of sex segregation might be more difficult to see from the outside. How do you know who's cooking back in the kitchen at a restaurant, and how

can you tell whether the person cashing your check at the bank is a cashier or a manager filling in for the moment?

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Make a list of all the jobs you've occupied. In those jobs, did you ever have someone of the same gender in the exact same job as you? Were there people of a different gender in that workplace, and were there trends in the types of jobs they tended to do? Can you think of examples of racial segregation in jobs you've worked?*

Sex segregation is complicated and can exist at multiple levels within a single institution or company. Take a college campus. At first glance, a college campus might look like an institution with a pretty good balance of women and men working together. If you begin with the faculty, chances are still good that you have more male professors than female professors, and this will especially be true at the higher ranks of academia (associate and full professor as compared with assistant professor). Nationwide in the United States, full-time tenured or tenure-track college professors as a whole are about 43% women, which is a marked improvement over the past (Flaherty, 2020).

But what happens when you begin to look at how those positions are distributed across disciplines? How many female professors are there in the natural and physical sciences as compared with the English department? If your college follows a typical pattern, you'll probably see a great many more women in the English department than in the biology or physics departments. What happens when we look at the security personnel on the average college campus? The student life and resident life staff? Cafeteria workers? "Maintenance" at a college might include those who clean the buildings, those who do physical repairs, and those who maintain the physical grounds of the college (landscaping), but the gender makeup of each of those types of jobs is very different. Women are more likely to do indoor cleaning, while men are concentrated in groundskeeping and physical repairs. What about the administration at your college? What's the gender makeup of the president, vice presidents, deans, provosts, and department chairs? How many men and women sit on the board of trustees? How many men serve as secretaries or executive assistants on your campus?

To help make sense of this complexity in relation to sex segregation in the workplace, researchers look at sex segregation at two levels, focusing on three units of analysis at each level. The first level is **occupational sex segregation**, and this simply refers to the concentration of women and men in different occupations. Occupations are categories defined by the U.S. Census to describe the kind of work people do, and because the census seeks to collect information about large proportions of the U.S. population, its categories are fairly broad. The more people you're gathering information about, the harder it is to include a lot of detail about their lives. So examples of census occupations include college and university teacher, truck driver, cook, salaried manager, cashier, nurse's aide/orderly, secretary, guard, and bookkeeper.

Most of the research on sex segregation is at the level of occupational sex segregation because the census conveniently provides a lot of information on this particular level of sex segregation. The examples seem straightforward enough until you start to unpack all the types of people that might fit into some of these broad occupational categories. Who exactly is a salaried manager? The manager at a fast-food restaurant is a salaried manager, as is the person who works as an office manager at a prestigious New York advertising firm, the plant manager at a slaughterhouse in Iowa, and the manager of a publishing house in San Francisco whose position is the second highest in the company. How similar are these jobs to each other? Looking at sex segregation at the level of occupation is easiest, but because it is the broadest category, it also tends to capture less segregation than more finely tuned units of analysis. If women tend to be the managers in fast-food restaurants rather than plant managers, those distinctions are lost in the broad outline of the census category of salaried manager.

**Job-level sex segregation** focuses on "the specific positions that workers hold within specific establishments" (Reskin, 1993, p. 243). This is a more finely tuned way of examining sex segregation in that it allows us to make distinctions between the McDonald's manager and the manager at the Iowa slaughterhouse. Information on job-level sex segregation is harder to come by than is occupational-level sex segregation; large data sources like the U.S. Census don't collect information about the exact type of position someone holds or the specific place he or she works. Collecting this kind of information is painstaking social research work, but when it has been done, it has revealed that the extent of job-level sex segregation is much higher than sex segregation by occupation.

One study found that during the 1970s, the index of job-level sex segregation was 30 points higher than that for occupational-level segregation (Bielby & Baron, 1984). The same study, based in California, analyzed 645 occupations in 290 work organizations and found that more than three-fourths of the men or women would have to be reclassified to degender the occupational categories (Bielby & Baron, 1986). In that same study, 96% of the 10,525 job titles were gender segregated, and only 8% of the workers shared a job title with a member of a different gender.

Whichever level of sex segregation is used, the evidence indicates that workplaces in the United States are highly segregated along both gender and racial lines, and these identities often intersect and crosscut in interesting ways. In his reporting on the social world inside a North Carolina slaughterhouse for the *New York Times*, Charlie LeDuff (2000) documented the complex ways in which jobs in the plant were distributed along gender and racial lines. Black women were assigned to the chitterlings room, where they scraped feces and worms out of intestines. White men were the supervisors and mechanics, except for the occasional white prisoner who might be assigned the dirty work along with other African Americans and Mexicans. Some Native Americans and Mexicans were given the job of assembling boxes.

Outside the kill floor, a mixture of Black women and Mexican men and women skinned the hog carcasses and butchered them into various parts. With the exception of a rare Mexican man, all the people on the kill floor where the pigs were ushered into the plant and killed were Black men. Jobs on the kill floor set the pace for the rest of the factory, and they paid a higher wage than others in the factory—as high as $12 an hour. There were quotas to be met, and the competition for jobs on the kill floor was high.

The reasons given by workers for why the kill floor consisted primarily of Black men rather than the Mexican, Native American, or white men included that Mexicans were too small or that they didn't like blood or heavy lifting. There were no reasons for why any of the women—Black, Mexican, or Native American—didn't work on the kill floor, because it was assumed that this was work that women were not capable of doing. One of the final reasons for why Black men worked on the kill floor, as provided by one Black male worker, was that "we built this country and we ain't going to hand them everything," where *them* referred to Mexican immigrants.

## Gender and Dangerous Work: Protective Labor Laws

One explanation for why you're less likely to find women doing the most dangerous jobs—like those on the kill floor—is the history of protective labor legislation. During the early period of industrialization in Europe and the United States, **protective labor legislation** argued that women could not work too many hours in factories or do certain kinds of labor because of the detrimental effects on women's health and their ability to perform their crucial household duties as wives and mothers. Even feminists of the period, such as Lucy Stone, argued that the special sensibilities developed by women in the private sphere as mother and wife (such as compassion, nurturance, and a better developed sense of morality) needed to be preserved in the competitive world of wage labor (Kessler-Harris, 1982).

So women were gradually prevented from working in places that sold alcoholic beverages, as it might corrupt their morality, and then from grinding and polishing metal, as it would clog their lungs. Work in underground mines would coarsen women's gentler natures, while any kind of work that could bring women into contact with strangers was also perceived as putting them in danger; this made the jobs of messenger, elevator operator, meter reader, letter carrier, and taxi driver all off-limits for women.

Other legislation focused on limiting not the types of jobs women could work but their working conditions. The most familiar of these was the length of the workday, and arguments to change to a 10-hour workday depicted women as physically weaker than men and desperately in need of protection from long work hours because of their "special physical organization" (Kessler-Harris, 1982, p. 187), including their childbearing and maternal functions. In hearings before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1908, physicians argued that women had a greater disposition to diseases and were in periodic "semi-pathological" states of health. Between 1909 and 1917, legislation that restricted the number of hours women could work in a day passed in 19 states.

The reduction in the number of hours a woman could work benefited married women, and many more married women began to move into the labor force in the period after World War I. Married women did not have to support their families on their income, and a shorter working day gave them more time to do household chores and care for children. The major problem with protective labor legislation aimed at women was that it assumed all women were, in fact, mothers or wives and needed to be protected primarily as such. The workday of women was limited in a period well before the institution of any minimum wage, and for a woman trying to support herself or her family through her job, cutting short her working hours meant cutting short her total income. This effort to protect women, then, also had the convenient effect of reducing

their overall earnings and provided another justification for occupational sex segregation by excluding women from some of the better-paying jobs or defining their jobs differently and as less valuable within the same factory walls.

Thus, the early history of industrialization in places like the United States and England was characterized by competition between women and men for the same jobs. Many who study the intersections among work, gender, and race argue that this competition continues in contemporary labor markets, like those of the slaughterhouse described previously. Especially since the second wave of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, women do enter occupations, jobs, and firms predominantly inhabited by men. But the usual result when enough women do so is resegregation of that particular area of the workforce.

During the 1970s, when women were believed to be making significant progress into many predominantly male occupations, only 33 of the 537 occupational categories actually saw an increase in the numbers of women of at least 9% (Reskin & Roos, 1990). For the smaller percentage of women who did actually enter predominantly male occupations, they most often found themselves witnesses to a process of gender turnover in that occupation. In 1970, women were 33% of all personnel, training, and labor relations specialists, but by 1980, they made up 47%; by 1988, they made up 59%; and by 2005, they made up 71%. Women made up 30% of insurance adjusters, examiners, and investigators in 1970, 60% in 1980, 72% in 1988, and 87% in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005; Reskin & Roos, 1990). Almost all the jobs we currently think of as predominantly female occupations were once predominantly male, including real estate agents, secretaries (who used to be called clerks), and elementary school teachers. In these occupations, men exited as women entered in large numbers, resegregating the occupation.

## The Anatomy of Sex Segregation

How exactly does this process happen for any given occupation? When the first woman is hired in a particular factory or office, do the men pick up and leave at once? Where do all those men go, and what predicts which jobs are likely to resegregate? In the beginning, before either segregation or resegregation occurs, an employer would be smart to discriminate against men rather than against women because women are generally conscientious, hard workers and can be paid less (Bielby & Bielby, 1988). Men can prevent women from being hired in a particular job or occupation by monopolizing the skills and training necessary to do the job.

The simplest example for many years in the United States was to prevent women from attending colleges and other educational training programs. If women cannot acquire the skills or knowledge necessary to do a certain job or are prevented from doing it effectively or at all by protective labor legislation, then employers have no choice but to hire only men. If you're an employer and the job for which you want to hire workers seems to carry a certain set of skills or knowledge, you're probably going to have to pay your workers more to do it, and if you're hiring mostly men, you'll probably have to pay them more than women. This is in part because women are willing to accept less pay because of the fewer jobs available to them, but it is also because of the connection between the perceived knowledge and skills necessary to do a

job and gender; as we've discussed, the jobs that men do are generally perceived as more skilled than the jobs women do.

The hypothetical employer who wants to lower labor costs has several options available. She or he can move her or his factory somewhere with a ready supply of cheaper labor. Usually, this means an area with weaker unions (as unions can negotiate for higher pay) and more competition among potential employees for jobs. For example, many factories have moved to the rural South in the United States, both because there is little tradition of labor organization in these communities and because the decline of agriculture and the high levels of poverty mean there are few jobs available to workers in those areas. If you're desperate for a job and there aren't a lot of other options around, as a worker, you're willing to accept lower pay for your work than you would in a situation with more available options.

Another option available to the business owner who wants to reduce his or her labor costs is to change the nature of the work being done by deskilling or automating it or making it part-time or home based. If you can break what was a complicated and skilled job into a series of routine and easily learned steps, usually along with automating many of the steps, you can justify paying your workers less than if more training is required to perform the job.

Part-time workers cost less because you don't have to provide them with benefits like health insurance or vacation time, and you can maintain high rates of turnover. If none of your workers stay at the job very long, they're not around long enough to get a raise and therefore cost you less to employ. Moving labor into the homes of your workers saves you overhead costs you would have to pay to provide space to work in, as well as the cost of paying someone to supervise workers.

In their study of several occupations that had transitioned from predominantly male to female beginning in the 1970s, Barbara Reskin and Patricia Roos (1990) found that these jobs became available to women largely because they became less attractive to white men. Men left occupations such as personnel manager, computer operator, insurance agent, and real estate salesperson when the jobs became deskilled, earnings declined, job autonomy was reduced, and working conditions deteriorated. Employers contributed to these processes by creating better jobs for men within their organizations or by making some positions part-time (Lorber, 1994).

Women took these jobs that had just been made less attractive because they were still better than many of the jobs the women had occupied before. This process of downgrading jobs as a way to reduce costs and then resegregating the jobs by gender creates a strong connection between gender and the type of work people do. Women are willing to accept lower salaries because their jobs are structured in ways that justify lower salaries. Hiring more women to do a job, paying less for the job, and reducing the quality of the job are all processes that go hand in hand.

Once a job has been converted from a man's job into a woman's job, gender ideology is employed to justify that occupation as inherently suited to women. This naturalizes some occupations as appropriate for women and others as appropriate for men, reinforcing the system of sex segregation in the workplace. For example, in the 1970s, residential real estate agent work began to transition from a predominantly male to a predominantly female occupation. In a

process similar to that found in many other occupations, men did not completely vacate the real estate business, but the real estate industry underwent the process of ghettoization by gender.

**Ghettoization** happens when lower-paid "women's" jobs are separated from the better-paid "men's" jobs within an occupation, job, or firm through the use of informal gender typing (Lorber, 1994). During the economic recession of the 1970s, residential real estate became much less profitable than it had been in the past, and it therefore became a less desirable occupation for white men. Men moved into commercial real estate, which brought much higher commissions and therefore better earnings, leaving residential real estate open for an influx of women. When employers began to hire large numbers of women to sell residential real estate, they began to argue that women were uniquely suited to these jobs because of their experience in running their own homes as wives and mothers and their knowledge of neighborhood schools and playgrounds. That women were good at residential real estate came to be perceived as natural, despite the fact that this had been a primarily male job until this time (Thomas & Reskin, 1990).

**Resegregation** happens in the workplace when an entire occupation transitions from one gender to another, usually from a predominantly male to a predominantly female occupation. This term covers the whole process of disproportionate numbers of women entering a male occupation and their eventual disproportionate representation in that occupation, which results in the work associated with that occupation being labeled women's work (Roos & Reskin, 1992). During the 1970s, the occupations of typesetter and composer underwent a process of resegregation from predominantly male to predominantly female—from 30% female in 1970 to 72% by 1989.

In their study of various occupations that had experienced a large shift in the gender composition of workers, Roos and Reskin (1992) found no examples of occupations that truly represented integration of women and men into the same workplace and the same jobs. Ghettoization was the most common outcome, with men and women existing in the same occupation but doing slightly different jobs or having different specialties. Resegregation was the other path, but no occupations actually achieved a level of integration, meaning anything approaching equal numbers of women and men.

Today, electronics manufacturers prefer women to men because, they argue, women have greater finger dexterity than do men, the same argument used to justify why women should do needlework in 19th-century hosiery factories. Other jobs, such as construction, are perceived as off-limits for women because of the amount of physical strength required. Teaching from the level of kindergarten through high school is now considered a job uniquely suited to women in the United States because of the flexibility it provides, especially for mothers. A teacher's schedule generally coincides with the schedule of children, making it easier for women to combine work and childcare, and therefore teaching becomes women's work.

But in the 19th century in rural America, teaching was viewed as and designed to be most compatible with men's work. Farmers could use teaching as a source of income during the months of the year when their labor was not needed in the fields. Male ministers, politicians, shopkeepers, or lawyers could use teaching as a good avenue for increasing their public visibility within the community (Strober, 1984). When the number of children attending school

increased and schools were broken down into individual grades with specific curricula, more formal credentials were required, and the school year was lengthened. Rather than increasing the compensation for teachers because of the increase in the skill level required for the job, schools kept the pay low and began a concerted effort to recruit more women into the field (because they knew women would accept the lower pay).

Teaching became the ideal profession for single, educated, middle-class women, and for many years, female teachers were not allowed to continue to work when they married. This historical evolution of teaching from good work for men to the perfect job for women—but only single, unmarried women—to an occupation well suited to married women with children demonstrates the ways in which the gender of different jobs and occupations is highly flexible and can change over time to justify whatever the gender status quo is in that occupation at the time. Ghettoization exists in the education field as well, as elementary teaching is now perceived as women's work in that it involves nurturing and is low paid, brings little autonomy, and has high rates of turnover. Men are overrepresented in the ranks of administrators and principals, where their work is stable, has high chances for promotion, and offers higher wages (Lorber, 1994).

Although much of the research on sex segregation in the workplace has been performed in the United States and other parts of the global North, these trends persist in the global South as well. Like farmers' daughters in the United States in the 19th century and in developing nations in Asia and South and Central America, daughters from farming families are sent to work in factories, where their lives are largely controlled by their employers. Women ages 16 to 24 make up 80% to 90% of the export-processing labor in Mexico, Southeast Asia, and other nations that engage in large-scale export production (Tiano, 1987). In Mexico's **maquiladoras**, assembly plants largely owned by American and other foreign companies located along the Mexico–U.S. border to take advantage of the supply of cheap labor across the border, 85% to 90% of the workers are women (Lorber, 1994). Most of the people working in the export zones around the world are women, and this means that access to cheap products in the developed world depends on the low wages and poor working conditions of these women in the global South. Sex and racial segregation in the workplace are crucial components of what make the global economy as we know it function.

## #MeToo, Sexual Harassment, and Sex Segregation

New research demonstrates that sexual harassment is also an important mechanism for creating sex segregation and contributing to the gender wage gap. Previous studies have demonstrated the effects of sexual harassment on victims' mental and physical health. Decades after the sexual harassment, victims report depressive symptoms, as well as increased levels of anger and self-doubt (Houle et al., 2011; McDonald, 2012; Willness et al., 2007). It's not surprising, then, that sexual harassment also decreases job satisfaction (Chan et al., 2008; Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Laband & Lentz, 1998), increases work absenteeism and work withdrawal (Merkin, 2008), and results in deteriorating relationships with coworkers (Gruber & Born, 1982; Loy & Steward, 1984). In addition to these individual costs, sexual harassment costs the U.S. federal government millions of dollars. From 1985 to 1987, costs were estimated at $267 million before

litigation and settlement fees (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1988). More than $200 million of those costs were due to lost productivity.

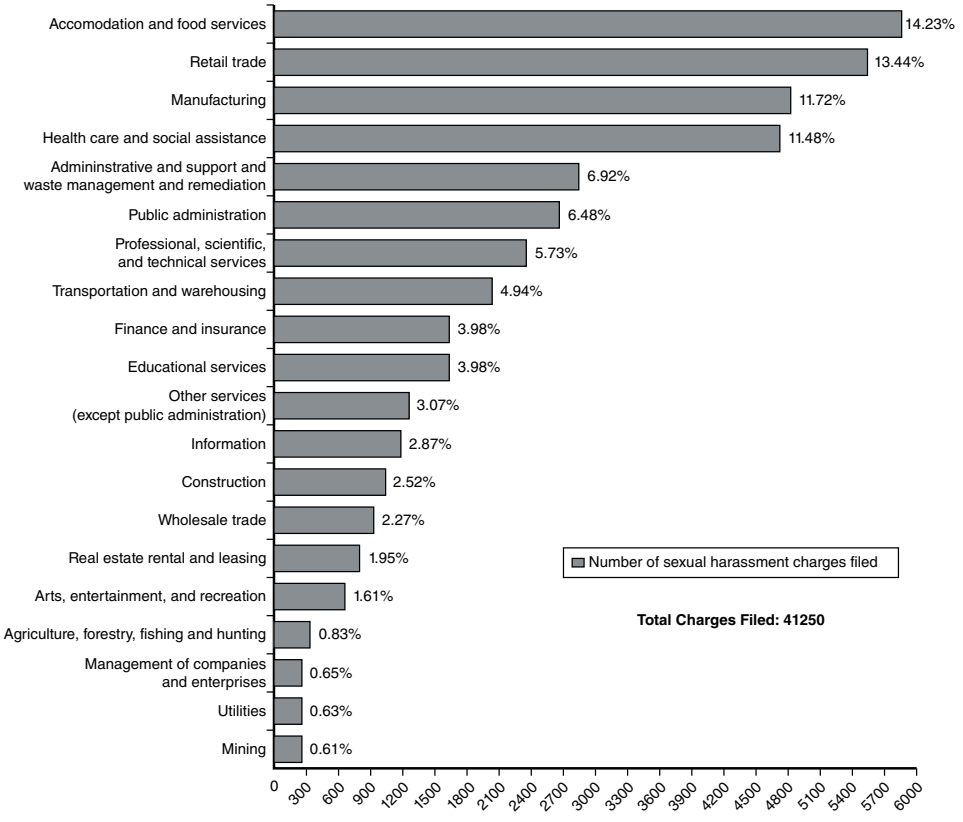
In their 2017 mixed-method study of the effects of sexual harassment on women's career trajectories, McLaughlin et al. (2017) demonstrated that sexual harassment also has economic effects on individual women. In their longitudinal study, women who had experienced sexual harassment were 6.5 times more likely to change jobs as compared to women who had not been victims of sexual harassment. Research also tells us that women are more likely to be sexually harassed in male-dominated occupations. As women are pushed out of predominantly male occupations by sexual harassment, occupational sex segregation increases (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2019). In addition to the mental and physical health costs of sexual harassment, victims experience financial hardship. There's the financial stress of having to quit a job to escape a toxic work environment. Leaving a job also causes career interruptions, which leads to significant lost earnings over the course of a career. Research tells us that those who have repeated gaps in their work life earn less over their lifetime. Forcing women out of jobs also likely affects their career attainment as they're forced to switch gears rather than moving smoothly up a ladder of successive promotions. In fact, McLaughlin et al. (2017) found that women who left a job due to sexual harassment often ended up with a job of lower quality or with lower pay.

Figure 9.4 shows industries and jobs with the highest rates of sexual harassment complaints.

Because the gender wage gap for women of color is already greater than for white women, the financial consequences of sexual harassment can be even more devastating. In addition, research demonstrates that women of color, whose race gives them double vulnerability in the workplace, are more likely to be victims of sexual harassment (Akhatar, 2019). The #MeToo movement itself demonstrates the ways in which sexual harassment experienced by women of color, as well as their contributions to movements to end sexual harassment, are often erased. The #MeToo movement often traces its beginnings to accusations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and actress Alyssa Milano's Twitter request on October 15, 2017, for women to respond with their own accounts of sexual harassment using the #MeToo hashtag. The hashtag was used 19 million times on Twitter alone, not including other social media sites like Instagram and Facebook. But in fact, the #MeToo movement began 10 years earlier with activist Tarana Burke, who coined the term to draw attention to the experiences of women and girls—particularly girls and women of color—with sexual violence (Ohlheiser, 2017). Additionally, the first Supreme Court case to recognize sexual harassment was filed by a Black woman, Mechelle Vinson (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018).

On social media, other Black activists pointed out the ways in which white women had not always supported Black women who were also victims of harassment. Months before the #MeToo hashtag spread, many women had called for a boycott of Twitter to protest the social media site's refusal to reinstate actress Rose McGowan's account. McGowan, who had been a vocal participant in the #MeToo movement, had tweeted the personal phone number of an alleged harasser, a violation of Twitter's privacy policy. White women rallied around McGowan in a way they had not in response to the online harassment of journalist Jemele Hill and actress Leslie Jones. Jones was attacked for her all-female version of the movie *Ghostbusters*, while Hill

**FIGURE 9.4 ■ Total Sexual Harrassment Charges Filed, by Industry, Fiscal Years 2005 Through 2015**




*Source:* This figure was published by Frye, J. (2017, November 20). Not just the rich and famous: The pervasiveness of sexual harassment across industries affects all workers. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/article/occupational-segregation-in-america/

*Note:* Frye's calculations of fiscal year 2005 through 2015 charge filing data from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission; unpublished data on file with Frye.

was harassed for calling President Donald Trump a white supremacist after his criticism of NFL players' protests. Despite vicious online attacks calling Jones an ape and her being sent pictures of her face with semen on it, few white women came to their defense or called for a boycott of Twitter. Legal scholar Angela Onwuachi-Willig (2018) suggests that in instances like those encountered by Hill and Jones, their race blinds many people to the role that gender also plays in their harassment. Media coverage of the two women focused on the racist nature of the harassment rather than on their gender. In reality, as intersectionality teaches us, both of their identities mattered. The experiences of Hill, Jones, and Burke are yet another reminder of the ways in which the experiences of women of color often get erased in feminist movements.

## The Wage Gap: Why Sex Segregation Matters

As we've already begun to see, sex segregation matters because of the ways in which it is connected to the gender wage gap. Regardless of whether women are working in completely different occupations or doing different kinds of jobs within the same occupation, women are paid less than their male counterparts. Researchers call this rather stark fact the **gender wage gap**, and it is usually calculated as the ratio of women's average earnings in an occupation to men's average earnings in the same occupation. In the United States in 2020, among full-time, full-year workers, the gender wage gap was 83.0 (Wisniewski, 2022)). This ratio is often translated into real dollar amounts, meaning that in 2020, women, on average in the United States, made about 83 cents for every dollar earned by a man. The gender wage gap exists even when women and men have comparable qualifications, and it is uniform across occupations, regardless of the degree of sex segregation within that particular occupation.

Historically, the gender wage gap has decreased in the United States since 1955, but in recent years, progress has largely stalled. Between 1980 and 1990, the gender wage gap gained 11.4 percentage points, but it gained only 5.4 percentage points over the next 15 years (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2008). As Figure 9.5 demonstrates, very little progress has been made in closing the gender wage gap in the last three decades.

## Making Connections: Sex Segregation and the Gender Wage Gap

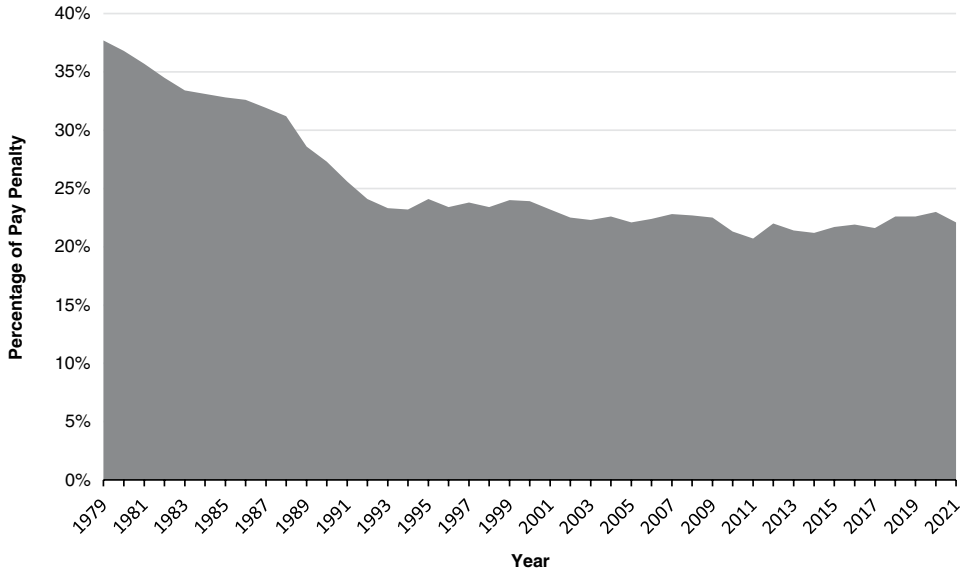
How are sex segregation in the workplace and the gender wage gap connected? This returns us to our recurring question about the relationship between difference and inequality. Clearly, sex segregation enforces a sense of difference; the fact that women are concentrated in certain types of jobs and occupations helps to create and reinforce gender ideologies about the different skills, abilities, and needs of men and women relative to work. This relationship between gender and work becomes a kind of endless loop, where because men do certain types of work, this work is perceived as better suited to men, and therefore, primarily men will continue to do what is defined as men's work.

This endemic system of sex segregation makes the idea of equal work for equal pay attractive in principal but difficult to reinforce in the real world. In a world in which men and women so rarely do the exact same kind of work, whether it's the type of machines they're using in a hosiery factory, the exact task they perform in a slaughterhouse, or whether they're selling a house or a commercial building, how can we establish exactly what equal work is? The differences established by sex segregation make the gender wage gap easier to justify by establishing two very different work worlds for women and men. William Bielby and James Baron (1987) described this situation:

> Men's jobs are rewarded according to their standing within the hierarchy of men's work, and women's jobs are rewarded according to their standing within the hierarchy of women's work. The legitimacy of this system is easy to sustain in a segregated workplace. (p. 226)

The gender wage gap is therefore connected to sex segregation in two ways. First, in any occupation, job, sector, or segment of the workforce composed primarily of dominant men, which in the United States means white middle- or upper-class men, the wage scale will be

**FIGURE 9.5 ■ Little to No Progress in Closing the Gender Wage Gap in Three Decades**




*Source:* Data adapted from analysis of Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG). (1979–2021). Current population survey; and Economic Policy Institute. (1979–2022). Current population survey extracts, Version 1.0.26 (2022), https://microdata.epi.org/

*Note:* Wages are adjusted into 2021 dollars by the CPI-U-RS. The regression-based gap is based on average wages and controls for gender, race and ethnicity, education, age and geographic division. The log of the hourly wage is the dependent variable.

higher than in those occupations, jobs, sectors, or segments composed primarily of either men of color or of women, regardless of their racial background. When women or people of color are concentrated in some area of the workforce, the compensation will be less (Tomaskovic-Devey et al., 1996), and when women enter an occupation, the wages for that occupation fall (Treiman & Hartmann, 1981).

This is true because of the processes we outlined previously; women's entry into an occupation or job coincides with a loss of wages in that occupation or job, and so when women enter new areas of the workforce in large numbers, the pay for workers declines. Some men work in predominantly female occupations, and some women work in predominantly male occupations. Men in areas of the economy dominated by women make less on average than their male colleagues in predominantly male occupations, but they still make more than their female counterparts in those same jobs; remember the cases of male elementary school teachers, nurses, social workers, and librarians riding the glass escalator. The women who work in predominantly male occupations also make more than their female counterparts in occupations dominated by women, but unlike men in predominantly female occupations, these women still make less than their male counterparts in the same occupation or job. This is largely because women in a

predominantly male workplace are less likely to be promoted, and therefore, their earnings do not compete with those of men.

The second way in which the gender wage gap and sex segregation are related is in the tendency for higher-paying jobs to also involve more authority or supervision than lower-paying jobs. A plant manager in a factory is paid more than the worker on the floor, and a doctor is paid more than a nurse—in part because both of these positions are endowed with more authority and involve supervising the work of others. Jobs that require workers to interact with people in a nurturing or interpersonal way pay less than jobs that do not.

For example, when the primary role of flight attendants was perceived as caring for airline passengers, keeping them happy, and creating a pleasant trip, flight attendants were paid less. When this job was upgraded to include safeguarding the safety of the passengers in the event of a crash or other emergency, the pay for this job increased to reflect the new authority associated with the position. The authority of flight attendants literally became enforced in the United States by the federal government; it's against federal law not to follow the directions of a flight attendant. Obviously, authority and supervision versus nurturing and interpersonal interaction have a distinctly gendered component. Women are supposed to be better at interpersonal interactions and nurturing, while men are perceived as natural authority figures. The sorting of men and women into these different types of jobs helps to recreate the gender wage gap by placing men in higher-paying positions with authority and women in lower-paying jobs that draw on their skills as nurturers.

## EXPLAINING SEX SEGREGATION AND THE GENDER WAGE GAP

Researchers have established that as much as 90% of the explanation for the gender wage gap lies with the prevalence of sex segregation (Petersen & Morgan, 1995; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993b). The gender wage gap remains an important determinant of inequality between women and men. We live in a culture in which money and income provide power and prestige. That women make less money on average than men gives them less power within family settings, and we've already discussed how income relates to decision-making in the home. In female-headed households in the United States and around the world, women's income is the sole source of support for children and other family members, and the gender wage gap makes it more difficult for women to provide sufficiently for their families.

On a global scale, the lower pay and stability inherent in the jobs into which women are segregated have implications for global levels of poverty; development organizations and workers have discovered that women's income can affect poor families in ways that men's income does not. Namely, women's income is more likely to be directed toward supporting a family and potentially providing upward mobility for a family than are men's wages. The gender wage gap matters at the lower economic levels of society as well as at some of the highest levels. The lack of women in positions of power and prestige in corporations, universities, and the government means that women have less power over the shape these various institutions take and, therefore, less of an impact on the important decisions made in these institutions in general.

In all these ways and more, the gender wage gap remains an important barrier to equality between women and men. How, then, do we explain why this gap exists, which means explaining why sex segregation persists across the workplace? We've discussed how an occupation ghettoizes or becomes resegregated historically, but how does segregation continue to persist across many different occupations today? There are several theoretical answers to these questions that help to explain the forces at play in the process of sex segregation. Like the sociological theories of gender we explored in Chapter 2, these theories can be grouped into different levels: individual, interactional, and institutional. Here, we discuss individual and institutional approaches, but keep in mind that no single theory is sufficient to explain in full the existence of sex segregation; each perspective reveals a different aspect of how this complicated process works. As many researchers who study these theories concede, a social phenomenon as widespread and entrenched as sex segregation is probably kept in place simultaneously by many of the causal factors identified in these theories.

## Socialization as an Explanation for Sex Segregation

We'll start with individual theories, which focus on the decisions workers make about the types of jobs they want to have and the ways in which the skills they have can influence the types of jobs they seek. The first individual-level theory is **socialization theory**, and you should not be surprised to find a discussion of socialization categorized as an individual-level theory of gender. Remember that individual theories include theories of socialization because these theories view gender as something that becomes internal to an individual. Once gender is internalized, it impacts the decisions, thoughts, and feelings of an individual in uniquely gendered ways. According to this perspective, as in other individual theories, gender operates from the inside out. As applied to the question of sex segregation, socialization theory argues that our experiences with gender socialization lead men and women to prefer different types of jobs, and so socialization is important to explaining sex segregation through the mechanism of shaping worker preferences. The question posed at the beginning of this chapter that asked you to think back on what your career aspirations were when you were younger is important to a socialization argument about sex segregation.

Socialization theory as an explanation for sex segregation receives some support from a study on the differences in job aspirations between older and younger women (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993b). If socialization is an important component in determining the types of jobs women and men aspire to do, then shifting gender roles should alter patterns of socialization. In his study, Donald Tomaskovic-Devey (1993b) did find that younger women were more likely than older women to be employed in sex-integrated jobs. This could suggest that younger women responded to changes in gender roles by choosing jobs that were less typically defined as women's work. This pattern did not hold true for men, however, as there were no differences between the level of sex segregation in the jobs of younger and older men. This could indicate that the socialization experiences have changed for women in ways that they have not changed for men.

Socialization theory as an explanation for sex segregation works well as good common sense, and there's a chance it has a role to play in explaining the grouping of men and women into different types of jobs. We learn a great deal about what it means to be gendered and how to

be gendered at a fairly early age, and these lessons affect the future lives we imagine for ourselves in a wide variety of ways. It makes sense that these gender lessons would also include predispositions to do certain kinds of work and not others. Empirically, there's little research beyond the study by Tomaskovic-Devey (1993b) that supports this particular approach, and even this study has potential flaws. Older women could be in more sex-segregated occupations because they chose those jobs based on their gender socialization, but it could also be that more sex-integrated jobs were simply not open or available to them when they began their work lives. Changing jobs becomes more difficult with age, and older women could simply be stuck in the sex-segregated occupations and jobs with which they began their careers despite the fact that they'd like to be in more sex-integrated occupations or jobs.

Other research suggests that the aspirations we form when we're young, although they tend to be fairly gender typed, are usually not the jobs in which we eventually find ourselves (Marini & Shu, 1998; Stroeher, 1994). Just compare what you wanted to be when you were very young with what you currently envision as your future career or with the job in which you are currently engaged. Do they match? The answer to what you want to be when you grow up changes as children age, usually becoming less gender-typed but often bearing little relationship to the series of careers a person might have as an adult. Other empirical research reveals no real differences in the kinds of work-related values held by women and men. An extensive study using data from 12 national samples, spanning the years 1973 to 1990, found that men and women consistently ranked the same set of values in the same order when asked what they most preferred in a job (Rowe & Snizek, 1995). The most important qualities in a job described by both men and women, in order from most to least preferred, were a feeling of accomplishment, high income, chance for advancement, job security, and short working hours.

## Human Capital Theory

The next individual-level theory comes from an economic perspective. **Human capital theory** is influenced by economic thought in its emphasis on an individual's choice of occupation as resulting from her or his attempt to maximize the benefits and reduce the costs involved in any particular job. As its name suggests, a concept central to this theory is that of human capital. **Human capital** refers to the skills workers may acquire (through education, job training, and job tenure) that affect their ability to be productive in their job (Seccombe & Beeghley, 1992). A simple way to think about human capital is that it includes anything that increases a worker's productivity. In a manufacturing setting, productivity is simply the number of products produced on an hourly or weekly basis. Factory workers are generally faster when they have had some training and when they have been on the job longer, so training and job tenure increase their productivity. Education is an important source of human capital in that many jobs (like doctor, nurse, and lawyer) require workers to achieve a certain level of education before they can adequately perform the job. But education throughout one's career theoretically improves a worker's human capital, as in the case of those in business or education who go back to school for advanced degrees. In many cases, employers pay the costs for their employees to obtain these degrees and other kinds of education and training based on the belief that this education will improve the overall productivity of their employees.

Human capital theory is a general theory in the discipline of economics, but as it applies to the specific case of sex segregation, there are three important assumptions. The first is a basic assumption of economics as a discipline in general—that human beings are rationally motivated. Within sociology, this approach to the study of behavior is called rational choice, and it assumes that people act in ways to maximize the rewards and minimize the costs for any particular course of action. According to this perspective, for each decision we make as individuals, we perform a careful calculus, like a list of pros and cons assembled in our head, and pursue the action with more pros than cons. The second assumption of human capital theory as it applies to sex segregation follows from the first: If we are rational actors who seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs, then it is rational for workers to invest in their human capital whenever possible. Increasing our human capital increases our productivity, and increasing our productivity means we make more money at our job. Rational choice theory allows that we can be motivated by rewards that are not necessarily monetary, but certainly, money is among the more powerful rewards sought by people in capitalist societies like the United States.

Gender enters the picture with human capital theory in the third assumption. According to human capital theory, women and men, on average and as groups, make different kinds of human capital investments. Everyone may be rational, but the unique position of women leads them to make decisions that take into account a different set of factors than do men when it comes to investing in their human capital. Namely, this difference is women's ability to bear children. According to human capital theory, not all women will bear children, but most do, and many more plan to do so at some point in their lives. Women's experiences of both marriage and childbearing pose problems to their future careers that are not faced by men, and therefore, when women think about their future career trajectories, they calculate how to maximize their human capital investments differently than do men. Women anticipate that the demands of being a wife and mother will have an effect on their jobs and careers in ways that being a husband and father will not. Based on these assumptions, women have two options to pursue relative to their human capital. First, they might choose simply to invest less in their job-related human capital (Chang, 2004). If their job or career will always be in competition with their role as mother and housewife, one option is to choose rationally to invest less in that particular area of their life. The second option open to women is to choose jobs or occupations that will allow them to maximize their human capital while still meeting the demands placed on them by their roles within the family.

This second option open to women becomes the focus of much of the research on human capital theory because it implies concrete predictions about what kinds of jobs most women will gravitate toward. If you're a woman who wants to maximize your human capital while retaining room for the demands that will be made on you in your role as mother and wife, what kinds of jobs are you more likely to choose? Human capital theory predicts that women will choose jobs and occupations that are more family or child friendly or jobs that include flexible hours and lesser penalties for reentry into the job after a period of absence. Flexible hours allow women to fit the responsibilities of childcare or elder care into their work schedules. Low penalties for reentry into a job or occupation make it easier for women to take time off for giving birth and caring for children or other family members. Teaching, as we discussed previously, is perceived

as an ideal occupation in which women can maximize their human capital. The work hours often correspond to the hours during which children are in school, making childcare easier for women. In addition, there are few penalties for teachers for leaving the workforce for a period and then returning. The converse is that jobs or occupations that require full-time or beyond-full-time hours and continuous labor force participation in order to be successful will have fewer women. High-powered managerial positions often require more than a full-time workweek and provide little in the way of flexibility. In addition, leaving these jobs for a year or two to take care of family members would have negative effects on an employee's chances for upward mobility. According to human capital theory, a rational woman seeking to maximize her human capital should avoid these types of jobs and occupations (Chang, 2004).

Human capital theory is another example of an individual approach to explaining sex segregation because women and men as individuals are choosing different occupations based on a rational calculus that seeks to maximize returns on their human capital. When many individual women and individual men make these same sorts of decisions, the result is the systematic sex segregation we observe in societies like the United States. The evidence in support of human capital theory is mixed: Some studies demonstrate potential support for this way of thinking about sex segregation, while others find weak relationships between human capital variables and sex segregation. Certainly, when we look at a profession such as teaching, which at the level of elementary and middle school education was 82% female in 2005, there is some support for human capital theory. Among chief executives, on the other hand, only 24% were women in 2005. But you may have already thought of some potential flaws in the basic argument proposed by human capital theory. Men and women are different because women bear children, but what about women who have no desire to bear children? What predictions would human capital theory make about them? Or what about men who might want to take on full responsibility for childcare or caring for other family members? Would human capital theory predict that these men would behave more like women in their choice of occupation and their methods for maximizing their human capital?

The research testing human capital theory explanations of sex segregation has little to say about the case of men who "look like women" in their desire to assume responsibility for care in the family, but there is research on the women who "look like men" in the sense of women who are not married and do not have children. According to the predictions of human capital theory, single and childless women should be less likely to work in predominantly female occupations; women without these family demands should rationally choose to maximize their human capital in other occupations and jobs. Research indicates, though, that single and childless women are just as likely to be employed in predominantly female jobs as are married women and women with children (Beller, 1982; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993a). Another prediction of human capital theory is that any job that is predominantly female should also be more family friendly. After all, the family-friendly nature of the job is the reason so many women choose to work in that particular area. Again, research suggests that predominantly female jobs are not any easier to reenter after leaving the labor force than are predominantly male jobs and are no more flexible in regard to the working hours (England, 1982, 1984; England & Farkas, 1986; Glass, 1990).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 9.2

### TRANSGENDER IN THE WORKPLACE

Discussions of gender discrimination in the workplace don't even begin to touch on the discrimination faced by those who live outside our convenient gender and sex categories. All the different kinds of discrimination discussed in this section are illegal in the United States when directed against women or men. An often costly and lengthy court case is required to prove when discrimination has taken place, but sex is one of the categories legally protected against workplace discrimination (along with race, ethnicity, and religious background). Gender identity and sexual identity are not statuses protected uniformly across the United States. Although various cities, states, and individual employers have passed laws and policies prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity or sexual identity, there is no federal law that prevents gays, lesbians, bisexuals, or transgender individuals from being discriminated against in the workplace.

Many transgender individuals face a unique set of concerns in the workplace as they transition from living as one gender to living as another. The number of individuals to whom these concerns apply is difficult to measure, but one survey conducted by the financial firm JPMorgan Chase estimated that roughly 0.2% of their employees self-identify as transgender. The number of businesses with policies directed toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2003, only 27 of the Fortune 500 companies had policies in place prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity. By 2008, that number had increased to 153 of the Fortune 500 companies (Luther, 2008). Four hundred of the 500 companies attend conferences like the Out and Equal Workplace Summit, while companies like General Motors, New York Life, and IBM recruit at the Transgender Career Expo (Belkin, 2008). Much of this progress is a result of the tireless work of the Human Rights Campaign, the largest LGBTQ civil rights organization in the United States. In addition, corporations are motivated to adapt their policies to be more inclusive; diversity has become a powerful recruiting tool for the innovative employees necessary to compete in today's marketplace.

Personal stories bear witness to this change, such as that of Jillian T. Weiss, who transitioned from a male lawyer in the 1990s but saw keeping her job in a New York firm after her surgery as simply outside the realm of possibility. Instead, in an interesting sex segregation twist, she got a job as a legal secretary after her transition, where her paper trail was harder to follow. Weiss's gender transition literally led her to follow the contours of sex segregation by occupation, going from an occupation (lawyers) that was 29.2% female in 2002 to an occupation (legal secretary) that was 82.2% female. Ten years later, Breanna L. Speed found the workplace component of her transition from living as a man to living as a woman to be the "simplest" part (Belkin, 2008). She stayed in the same job as a data administrator and was assisted by the human resources department in her company with her gender transition. After laying the groundwork for several months, Wendell eventually left work on Friday to be replaced by Breanna on Monday.

Although not all transgender individuals are as lucky as Ms. Speed, not all of them are necessarily forced to leave their jobs altogether as did Ms. Weiss. How do transgender individuals fit into this discussion of sex segregation in the workplace and the gender wage gap? In the past, women have sometimes passed as men to gain access to fields denied to them based on their gender. This is certainly not the motivation of transgender individuals today, but how will their presence potentially reshape the way gender operates in the workplace?

Do trans women experience the same kind of downward mobility in the workplace as Ms. Weiss? What about trans men? What would a genderless workplace look like, or a workplace in which switching gender from Friday afternoon to Monday morning was not perceived as such an unusual thing?

## Gendered Organizations

Individual-level explanations of sex segregation focus on the decisions made by individuals and how those decisions result in a workforce segregated along gender lines. Other potential explanations focus on discrimination that might occur interactionally in the workplace and on how the structure of work itself has gendered implications. This institutional-level approach examines how gender gets built into the very functioning of organizations. It makes sense to call this approach gendered organizations or institutionalized barriers. Gendered organizations theory should be familiar from our discussion of this theory in Chapter 2. Joan Acker (1990), one of the main proponents of gendered organizations, argued that organizations like businesses are gendered in fundamental ways. Sex segregation is maintained not just because of an aggregation of individual choices or because of tendencies toward discrimination in interactional processes. Rather, any workplace is an inherently gendered institution from the beginning. Organizational routines, jobs, and behavioral assumptions are all fundamentally gendered, and the fact that employers and employees are operating within a context that is fundamentally gendered is, by and large, taken for granted (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993a). This explains the power and persistence of sex segregation, because sex segregation is not just one particular outcome of the workplace; it is a fundamental part of how businesses work and therefore an integral part of their functioning.

The gendered nature of organizations in the workplace becomes taken for granted, in part through the supposedly neutral ways of defining basic concepts like jobs and wages, which actually carry highly gendered meanings. Acker (1990) pointed to how a *job* is supposedly a gender-neutral term, a position that can be filled by any abstract human being. Yet for many employees, the ideal human being to fill that job is a male worker whose family responsibilities are being taken care of by a wife at home. In her historical examination of wages, Alice Kessler-Harris (1991) pointed to a similar dynamic regarding how men and women are paid. *Wages*, at first appearance, is a gender-neutral term that simply describes the money a worker receives in compensation for her or his labor. But throughout the history of business and government debates about what constitutes an acceptable wage, gender has always been front and center in discussions about how much money women and men should make.

Table 9.2 summarizes theories that seek to explain sex segregation and the gender wage gap.

Traditionally, debates about appropriate wages reflected a long tradition concerning the **family wage**, or the sum necessary to sustain all family members. Regardless of what the reality on the ground is or has been, the ideal family wage has often been conceived of as a male wage, reflecting the idealization of the sole male breadwinner. If a family wage is supposed to be a male wage, where does that leave women's wages? A woman's wage was often conceived of as

**TABLE 9.2 ■ Theories of Sex Segregation and the Gender Wage Gap**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Gender socialization | Individual | Individuals are socialized into gender roles as children that then affect their interests and skills; these gendered interests and skills lead to gendered careers. |
| Human capital | Individual | Individuals acts in rational ways to maximize their human capital, or any skills/training that increase productivity; because of women's role in reproduction, they can maximize their human capital by choosing jobs with high flexibility; these rational choices result in sex segregation. |
| Gendered organizations | Institutional | Gender is built into the normal functioning of organizations through gendered logic; for example, the way jobs are defined make it so the ideal worker is a man, undistracted by the need to care for children or a household. |

supplementing those of other family members rather than as solely providing for the sustenance of all family members. This obviously provided justification for paying women less than men; a whole family was depending on a man's wage, while women's income was merely a welcome addition to the main source of income. Of course, this ignores the many women historically who were the sole breadwinner for their families and the men who were not, in fact, supporting a family but still experiencing the benefit of receiving a family wage. Maintaining this way of thinking about wages was a way of simultaneously preserving a social order in which women depended on men and were kept out of the labor force. The idea of a wage, then, is not a gender-neutral term but one that carries a heavy history of ideas about how wages could be used to maintain women's dependency.

In a more contemporary context, gendered organizations theory points to the way in which other seemingly gender-neutral practices have gendered implications. **Internal labor markets** describe the ways in which larger firms frequently provide structured opportunities for advancement to those currently employed with the firm (Wharton, 2005). Essentially, many large organizations promote from within. This practice in and of itself seems to have few gendered implications until we consider the ways in which gender segregation works within many workplaces and the complex system through which internal labor markets function. Promotions are more likely to be given to individuals in certain types of jobs and areas within a firm than to others. Research demonstrates that women tend to be segregated into occupations and jobs that have fewer positions of authority than male occupations and positions (Huffman & Cohen, 2004). Women segregated within a firm in an area with few opportunities to demonstrate their authority are less likely to be promoted within the firm. A secretary or administrative assistant has little job authority and is much less likely to be promoted to management level than the individuals in other jobs within the firm that are less female dominated. Existing systems of sex segregation and ghettoization of women make the apparently gender-neutral practice of using internal labor markets a system that favors men's internal promotion over that of women.

Another example of the ways in which work organizations have gender built into their basic functioning is in the tools and techniques used in different types of jobs and occupations. In

occupations or positions traditionally performed by men, the tools and techniques used to do those jobs come to reflect the needs and interests of men. An example of how the very design of tools can have gendered implications comes from a study by Barbara Reskin and Heidi Hartmann (1986) of women working outdoor jobs for AT&T. Injury rates for women working these jobs were higher than the accident rates for men until lighter and more mobile equipment was introduced. The previous heavier and less mobile equipment was probably not intentionally chosen to make it more difficult for women to perform the job; rather, it was chosen for the men who had, in the past, been the ones primarily doing the job. This neutral decision about what kind of equipment to use in a job setting can have exclusionary practices, making it more difficult and dangerous for women to do certain types of jobs.

## TRANS MEN AT WORK

These three theories of sex segregation suggest very different mechanisms through which the sorting of men and women into different jobs happens. The experiences of transgender and nonbinary people in the workplace can help reveal more about how gender operates on the job. In one recent survey of transgender and/or nonbinary people, 67% reported that they were terminated, forced to resign, denied a promotion, and/or not hired into a new position within the last year. Specific types of negative treatment experienced by transgender and/or nonbinary people in the workplace include coworkers ignoring pronouns (47%), feeling the need to hide their gender identity (53%), and being expected to present a certain way in the workplace (23%) (Fogarty & Zheng, 2018; Herman et al., 2016). In one experiment, researchers found that transgender employees received lower ratings of masculine cognitive skills, like competence, compared to where there was no revealed transgender status (Rice et al., 2022). Because, as we've discussed, masculine skills are more valued in the workplace, this suggests part of the reason why transgender people may experience a disadvantage.

In her study of female-to-male (FTM) trans men in the workplace, Kristen Schilt (2006) suggested that FTMs can serve as a unique case for testing these theories of sex segregation and discrimination in the workplace. Trans men have a potentially unique perspective on gender discrimination in the workplace as a result of their "outsider-within" position. Trans men were born as women, and in Schilt's study, many had experienced being a woman in the workplace. Although they became categorized as *within* the category of men, their prior lives as women also provided them with an *outsider's* perspective on masculinity at work. What happens to these individuals when they transition into being a man, some within the same workplace environment? Does their gender socialization as women trump their new adult transition to living as men? Is the same individual with the same education, skills, and abilities (human capital) treated differently when her gender status changes to that of a man? How does the gendered organization of workplace settings affect those moving out of one sex category and into another? From a status characteristics perspective, what are the performance expectations for a trans man in the workplace?

Although there are important variations in the experiences of trans men in Schilt's (2006) study, which we discuss later, two-thirds of the 29 respondents she interviewed reported receiving some kind of advantage at work after their transition to being a man. Schilt categorized these advantages into four main types: gaining authority and competency, gaining respect and

recognition for hard work, gaining "body privilege," and gaining economic opportunities (p. 476). Several interviewees, such as Henry, reported experiencing firsthand the authority gap that researchers have identified between women and men in the workplace (Elliott & Smith, 2004); of his interactions in the workplace after transitioning to being a man, Henry said, "I'm right a lot more now. . . . Even with folks I am out to [as a trans man], there is a sense that I know what I am talking about" (Schilt, 2006, p. 476). Another respondent noticed the way customers bypassed his female boss and came directly to him with questions, reflecting an assumption that he would know more as a man. Paul, who openly transitioned in the field of secondary education, noticed how he was called on to speak at meetings more often as a man than he had been as a woman. In one especially interesting anecdote revealing the increased competency attributed to these individuals posttransition, Thomas told a story about a fellow attorney who congratulated his boss for firing "Susan" (a pseudonym for Thomas's name before his transition) because she was incompetent while noting that the new guy (Thomas) was "just delightful" (Schilt, 2006, p. 477). Thomas and Susan, in this anecdote, are the exact same person, but while Thomas was perceived to be delightful, Susan was perceived to be incompetent.

Trans men also reported often having to work less hard than they had as women while receiving more respect and recognition as men. Preston transitioned openly while remaining at his blue-collar job as a forklift operator. As a woman, Preston received little support as a female crew supervisor, often finding herself short of staff yet still expected to carry out the job competently. These problems disappeared when Preston transitioned to being a man, and in his last three performance reviews on the job, he received the highest performance ratings of his career. These high ratings were despite Preston's admission that he was doing nothing differently than he had done as a woman and that actually, he was working less in his transition to part-time. Another trans man, Crispin, reported losing jobs as a female construction worker despite his extra effort because employers gave preferential treatment to male employees based on the assumption that men had families to support (Schilt, 2006).

Gaining body privilege was another kind of reward men received after their transition. *Body privilege* here means freedom from unwanted sexual advances or undue attention to their sexuality. One man reported being relieved to be free from "having my boobs grabbed and being called 'honey' and 'babe'" as he was in a job waiting tables before his transition. Another trans man reported his relief at being free from the sexual harassment of his boss, while a trans man in a blue-collar job noted that "obvious dykes" (Schilt, 2006, p. 480) in these workplaces were still subject to sexualized comments and unwanted inquiries into their sexuality; as a man, these concerns largely disappeared.

Finally, becoming a man brought many of the men in Schilt's (2006) study increased economic opportunities in a variety of forms. Carl, who had started and now owned his own business, believed this career path would have been impossible for him had he remained a woman. Another respondent, Henry, attributed his success as a lawyer to his gender transition, especially because he would not have been able to succeed in law as an obvious dyke, and he had no interest in conforming to the gender norms that would have been necessary for him to succeed in law otherwise. Although Henry admitted that he might have been successful as a female lawyer, it would have involved "dressing the part" in skirts and other attire worn by female lawyers, and to him, this felt like a kind of drag. Another trans man was openly discriminated against in his job before his transition because of his gender ambiguity. His boss told him he could not

appear in the public area at the front of the restaurant at which he worked because his appearance would scare people. This discrimination is something he no longer feels he has to face after his transition. Although none of the men in Schilt's study magically found themselves making more money after their transitions to life as men, they did encounter a decided lack of barriers to employment, promotion, and entrepreneurship.

Based on these findings, Schilt (2006) concluded that the experiences of trans men in her study provided little support for gender socialization or human capital theory as explanations for workplace discrimination and the gender wage gap. The unique case of trans men who openly transitioned in the same work setting provided strong evidence against human capital theory. In the case of the lawyer, Thomas, his exact same set of skills, capabilities, and education was judged completely differently when he was Susan than after he became Thomas. Trans men were socialized as women, and gender socialization theory predicts that this should condition the jobs they choose for themselves as well as how they approach those jobs and interact within them; because trans men have already been socialized as women, they should retain these internalized disadvantages even with their transition to men. Yet this does not seem to be the case for the men in Schilt's study; although they were raised as women, they were still able to succeed as men after their transitions.

The theory that the case of trans men seems to most clearly support is that of gendered organizations. The experiences of trans men are important because the advantages that cis men receive in the workplace are often invisible to them. Those within the gendered organizations perspective argue that this is true because of the subtle ways in which gender is built into the functioning of workplaces as organizations. Take the case of Crispin, the construction worker discussed previously. Crispin knew after his transition that women were often let go from construction jobs because of an assumption that jobs were more valuable to men with families than they were to a single woman. He knew this because he had actually been told this by foremen in his life as a woman. But to the cis men who do construction work, it is difficult to understand that keeping your job is the result of gender bias built into the functioning of an organization; you may not even be aware that anyone else has lost his or her job while you kept yours, and you are more likely to assume that you kept your job because you are competent rather than because you are a man. The outsider-within perspective of trans men allows them to see the hidden dimensions of gender hard at work in the world of their jobs.

Masculinity benefited some but not all of the trans men in Schilt's (2006) study. Pointing us again to the importance of considering overlapping identities, Schilt found that the *patriarchal dividend* that accrues to trans men is most powerful for tall, white men who are further along in their hormonal treatments. The patriarchal dividend, as we discussed in Chapter 2, is "the advantages men in general gain from the subordination of women" (Schilt, 2006, p. 466; see also Connell, 1995). But this gain was not distributed equally to all men in Schilt's study. A Black trans man summarized his experiences: "I went from being an obnoxious Black woman to a scary Black man" (Schilt, 2006, p. 486). This African American trans man and several others interviewed by Schilt felt they had to manage their identities as Black men carefully and that this sometimes negatively impacted their work experiences. After their transition, Black men were labeled as threatening or aggressive. An Asian American trans man felt that he was denied any advantages at work because of his height (being short) and the stereotype of Asian men as passive and, therefore, less masculine.

Height points us to other ways in which the patriarchal dividend was sometimes denied to trans men. Some trans men who did not use hormonal treatments felt there was little change in their work experiences, perhaps because this group was still perceived to be women by their coworkers, who often slipped into the use of feminine pronouns to refer to them. In addition, some trans men in the early stages of their transition did not feel much of an advantage because of their status as men. Early in the transition process, trans men may not be taking hormones or may have just begun hormone therapy and therefore may not have facial hair. This lack of facial hair makes many trans men appear like younger men. One trans man commented that he went from looking as if he was 30 (as a woman) to looking as if he was 13 (as a man). Trans men in this category also reported not experiencing a clear advantage after their transition, indicating the important ways in which gender and age intersect to provide privilege. This also seemed true for height. Hormones can make biological women grow facial hair, but they cannot change their height. Trans men who were shorter (5'1" to 5'5") felt their height also placed them at a disadvantage as men and reduced the amount of authority they had in workplace settings.

Considerations of age, height, appearance, and race all demonstrate the important ways in which the patriarchal dividend is not equally accessible to female-to-male transgender people or to men in general. This is a good example of the importance of an intersectional approach to gender, focusing our attention on the ways in which race, age, and other identities condition how we experience gender. It is also consistent with what we know about hegemonic masculinity as a theory. Remember that hegemonic masculinity teaches us that in any specific setting, certain masculinities are privileged over others. For many of the trans men in Schilt's (2006) study, being white and tall and looking older brought the greatest advantages posttransition.

## COMPARABLE WORTH AND OTHER SOLUTIONS TO THE GENDER WAGE GAP

If the research of Schilt (2006) at least suggests some evidence in support of gendered organizations as an explanation for sex segregation and the wage gap, what are some possible solutions based on this theoretical approach? Comparable worth is a method proposed by many in the second wave of the feminist movement for redressing the gender wage gap, and it can be aligned with a gendered organizations approach. **Comparable worth** as a policy seeks to raise the wages of the low-paying jobs occupied predominantly by women by demonstrating the gendered ways in which jobs are socially constructed. Using job evaluation, comparable worth seeks to unpack the complex relationship between the gender composition of a particular job or occupation, the relative evaluation that job or occupation receives, and the compensation for that job or occupation.

Under the Equal Pay Act of 1963, men and women are supposed to be paid the same amount in jobs that are "equal" (Giele & Stebbins, 2003). But how exactly do you determine how jobs are equal when no two jobs are ever really the same? **Job evaluation** is one way of answering this question by determining how pay is assigned to jobs and by evaluating those pay rates as fair or unfair (Wharton, 2005). In comparable worth cases, job evaluation is used to generate rankings of jobs within an organization or firm, and these rankings consistently demonstrate that women receive lower average wages in jobs that are comparable with those occupied by men. In cases in

which one consistent job evaluation plan is used to set pay throughout a firm or organization, women nearly always receive higher wages relative to men than they do in firms or organizations that do not use job evaluation (England, 1992). In this way, comparable worth corrects for the way in which gender is built into the structure of organizations by standardizing the methods for distributing pay for different jobs regardless of the gender composition of that job.

In the 2020 presidential election, two Democratic candidates included proposals to lessen the gender wage gap in their platforms. California senator Kamala Harris's plan would dictate that companies with over 100 employees would be required to disclose pay data to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to show that they've closed the gap between the earnings of women and men who do comparable jobs. Companies unable to demonstrate that they've closed the gap would be penalized a percentage of their profits. Harris's plan shifts the burden of proving unequal pay from individuals to the corporations themselves. Under existing law, the only way to prove gender discrimination in the workplace is to report concerns to the EEOC or file a lawsuit. The criteria for evidence in a class action lawsuit has become almost insurmountable in recent years. A class action lawsuit against Walmart in 2011 made it all the way to the Supreme Court before being dismissed on the grounds that there was no "significant proof" of discrimination (Toobin, 2011). Under Harris's plan, corporations would be fined 1% for every percentage of the wage gap that still exists. The money from the fines would provide a funding source for a federal family leave program, a program the United States does not currently have (Zhou, 2019).

Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren's plan for closing the gender wage gap focuses specifically on the plight of women of color. Warren's plan focuses on federal contractors, companies that enter into contracts to do work, supply labor or services, or offer the sale of products or services. Companies with federal contracts employ about one-fourth of the workforce in the United States (Economic Policy Institute, 2017). Under Warren's plan, these federal contractors would have to disclose pay data broken down by race, gender, and age. Federal agencies would then not do business with companies with a bad track record on pay for women of color or other types of discrimination. Both Warren's and Harris's plans would also bar federal contractors from using forced arbitration agreements. These agreements force workers to stay out of the courts, where they're more likely to win discrimination cases and, when they do win, are likely to get more money. Getting rid of forced arbitration agreements would make it easier for workers to fight wage theft. This would help women of color specifically because they're disproportionately likely to work low-wage jobs. Warren's plan would ban federal contractors from asking about salary or criminal history. Asking about previous salary hurts women in general and specifically women of color because they're likely to have been paid less in their previous job. Under Harris's plan, companies would have to stop asking women about previous salaries in order to receive "equal pay certification" from the EEOC (North, 2019; Zhou, 2019).

## BIG QUESTIONS

- In this chapter, we discussed how much of the work performed by women throughout the world goes largely unmeasured by official labor statistics and, therefore, remains invisible. What questions does this raise about what we consider to be work and what we don't? How is gender built into the ways in which we think about what work is and what it means to work?

- In Chapter 8, we talked about the sexual division of labor and how some gender theorists argue that this division is the key to understanding gender inequality. How does what you've learned in this chapter on the gender of work connect to this perspective on the sexual division of labor? Does the information in this chapter seem to support the view that the sexual division of labor is central to gender inequality, and how so?
- Throughout this book, we've asked questions about the relationship between gender difference and gender inequality. In this chapter, we discussed sex segregation and the fact that women and men generally work different kinds of occupations and jobs. This leads to the gender wage gap, but can you imagine a world in which men and women worked different kinds of jobs and occupations but this did not lead to inequality in the form of a gender wage gap or other kinds of inequality?
- How important is it that women earn less than men on average? In many parts of the developing world, this affects overall poverty rates. What are other implications of the gender wage gap? How important do you think this gender inequality is relative to other examples of gender inequality we have discussed so far in this book?
- The implications for how to correct sex segregation in the workplace are very different depending on whether you take an individual-, interactional-, or institutional-level approach. What are the implications of an individual-level approach? An interactional-level approach? An institutional-level approach? How do those implications influence the way you think about these different approaches to explaining sex segregation?
- Several of the theories and approaches discussed in this chapter suggest that gender inequality is built into the very structure of economic systems and society. Do you agree with this perspective? What evidence might you assemble in support of this argument? What evidence might you assemble to contradict this argument? What are the implications of this perspective for reducing gender inequality in relation to work?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. Do your own investigation on the gender wage gap and sex segregation. Information for the United States is available at the following website: www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.pdf. Pick some occupations you're interested in and look up the percentage of females in that occupation, and then calculate the gender wage gap. What's surprising about this information? Can you find an occupation in which women make more than men? What theories might you develop about which occupations tend to be more segregated than others and which have larger gender wage gaps?
2. How have attitudes about gender and work changed across time? Interview people from different generations—older and younger women and men—about their experiences

with work and how they feel about work. You might ask older women and men questions about what kind of jobs they had, what kind of jobs were appropriate for different genders during their time, what the attitudes were then toward women and men working, and so on. Interview younger individuals and compare how the gender of work has changed over time.

3. Pick a firm or organization with which you are familiar and conduct an audit of its level of sex segregation. Make a list of all the jobs within that firm or organization and the gender of the people occupying those jobs. Pay attention to details and to the subtle differences between jobs. For example, which jobs are supervisory (have authority over other workers), and is there a gender trend in who occupies those jobs? What are potentially subtle differences in what seem like relatively similar jobs? For example, in a law firm, who does more pro bono (free) legal work? Do different lawyers tend to take different kinds of cases?

4. Test some of the assumptions of the theories we discussed in this chapter that explain sex segregation in the workplace. Interview people already in the workplace or those preparing for future jobs. Ask them how they decided on their particular career or occupation. As predicted by human capital theory, do women choose careers with childcare and family considerations in mind while men do not? How does socialization seem to impact their career choices? If they are already working, have they faced any discrimination or advantages in the workplace as a result of their gender? What is their sense of the gender breakdown of their particular job, occupation, or firm?

5. Go to the library and find books or articles on the work lives of women or men in several different societies. Find a mix of industrialized societies and other kinds of societies. What are the important tasks to be accomplished in each of these societies? Among these tasks, which seem to be considered work and which are not? Is this related to gender (are the things men do more likely to be considered work than the things women do or vice versa)? What kinds of tasks seem to be considered men's work or women's work, and how does that vary across the societies?

6. Do a content analysis of some popular culture medium. What does this particular media outlet say about the gendering of work? For example, you might compare men's and women's magazines. How does the amount of content dedicated to thinking about the workplace in these magazines compare? How are the messages being sent about what work means to men and women different? Do men's magazines reinforce the idea that men should "Be a Big Wheel" or any of the other ideals of manhood?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**Institute for Women's Policy Research: "Pay Equity & Discrimination"**

Multi-issue organization that "conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialog, and strengthen families, communities, and societies."

www.iwpr.org/initiatives/pay-equity-and-discrimination

**National Girls Collaborative Project**

"The vision of the NGCP is to bring together organizations throughout the United States that are committed to informing and encouraging girls to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)."

https://ngcproject.org/about-ngcp

**American Association of University Women**

"AAUW has been empowering women as individuals and as a community since 1881. For more than 130 years, we have worked together as a national grassroots organization to improve the lives of millions of women and their families."

www.aauw.org

**National Organization for Women**

"As the grassroots arm of the women's movement, [NOW] is dedicated to its multi-issue and multi-strategy approach to women's rights. NOW is the largest organization of feminist activists in the United States, with hundreds of thousands of contributing members and more than 500 local and campus affiliates in all 50 states and the District of Columbia."

http://now.org

## KEY TERMS

Comparable worth
Family wage
Gender wage gap
Ghettoization
Glass ceiling
Glass escalator
Human capital
Human capital theory
Informal labor
Internal labor markets

Job evaluation
Job-level sex segregation
Maquiladoras
Occupational sex segregation
Protective labor legislation
Resegregation
Sex segregation
Socialization theory
Vulnerable employment

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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# 10 HOW DOES GENDER AFFECT WHAT YOU WATCH, WHAT YOU READ, AND WHAT YOU PLAY?

## The Gender of Media and Popular Culture

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **10.1** Explain some ways that gender can influence media content.
- **10.2** Compare and contrast media power theory and audience power theory.
- **10.3** Summarize some ways transgender people have become more visible in the media.
- **10.4** Define slash fiction and describe its significance.
- **10.5** Discuss some examples of how images we see in the media influence our perceptions of particular groups of people.
- **10.6** Summarize the limitations of "love your body" and postfeminist discourse.
- **10.7** Summarize some reasons video games are often connected to masculinity.
- **10.8** Explain how leisure time can be gendered.

How much time do you spend watching television; listening to podcasts; following someone's YouTube channel; going to movies; checking Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok, or Twitter; playing with a Wii or an Xbox; reading magazines; or watching sports? How different do you think your answers would be if you were of a different gender? Does gender influence what you watch on television or how much or how often you watch? How do advertisements use gender and sex to sell us things, and how does that impact the way we think about what it means to be men and women?

What do all these media outlets tell us about our sexuality and about how sexuality is connected to gender? How many of our assumptions about what people different from us are like are formed by what we see in the media and popular culture? How do the media and popular culture influence the way we understand racial and class identities and the ways in which these identities intersect with gender? And who's in charge of dictating all these images we see, read, and absorb in our daily lives?

How does gender matter behind the scenes of the media, as an institution, in dictating who gets to be on television, in the movies, on Spotify, or in a magazine? What subtle messages about gender are being sent by this complicated world of popular culture?

## THE MEDIA: AN INTERESTING INSTITUTION

These are the questions we'll be exploring in this chapter, and it's a wide and varied bag of topics related to gender. Before we dive in, we need to think about what it means to see the media as an institution. We've already discussed several examples of institutions and explored the gendered nature of these institutions. Institutions are a basic building block of society and of sociology as a discipline because they help us explain how society works as a whole. We've looked at friendship, courting, marriage, families, and work as examples of gendered institutions.

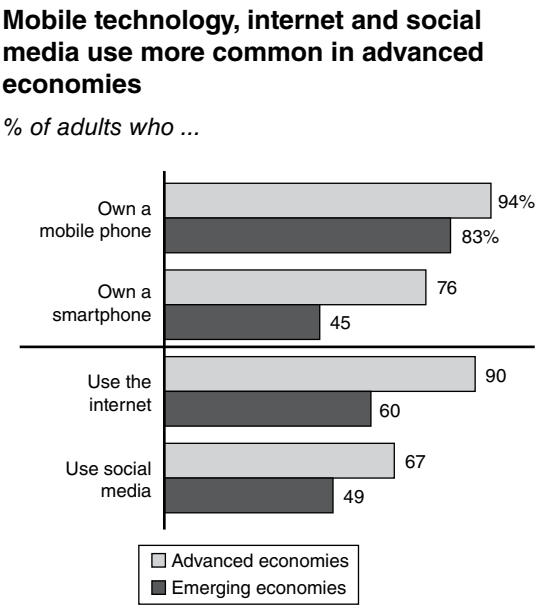
The media is a slightly different kind of institution. Like marriage, courting, and friendship, the media is certainly also a set of behaviors. Having a television in your household is a behavior, even if the exact form of what having a TV means is changing. In 2021, 82% of people in the United States have at least one Internet-connected TV device, up from 80% in 2020, 74% in 2019, 65% in 2016, and 30% in 2011 (Silver, 2021).Using the Internet—for TV or other purposes—is also a behavior and a widespread one—there were more than 5 billion Internet users worldwide in 2022, making up 63.1% of the global population (Statista Research Department, 2022). The ways in which the Internet has transformed our access to information, our lives as consumers, and the impact of social movements, to name just a few examples of the effects of digital media, are all examples of behavior. But the media as an institution is also made up of many formal organizations.

Figure 10.1 shows how access to the Internet, social media and smartphones is uneven across different regions of the world.

A **formal organization** is a group of people who interact regularly and have a set of explicit, written rules. Courting was a set of behaviors, but no formal organizations regulated how people courted because there were no written sets of rules people were obliged to follow to properly engage in courting behavior. Formal organizations are involved in marriage as an institution, including churches and government bodies that make decisions about the legal definitions of marriage. But unlike courting or marriage, formal organizations are a central component of the media as an institution. The media is supported by the individual behaviors of millions of people buying and turning on their televisions as well as going to the movies, browsing the Internet, and playing video games, but without all the organizations that produce the content that comes out of the television, film projector, Internet, or video game, those behaviors would not take place.

Because of the importance of these formal organizations to a consideration of the media in general, there are two ways of approaching our own investigation of gender and the media. The first is to examine the structure of the formal organizations involved in the creation and production of all the "stuff" we call the media. This approach means taking a behind-the-scenes look at what goes on at television and cable networks, movie studios, publishing firms, advertising firms, and Internet content providers. Most of the formal organizations involved in the media are also businesses and corporations in the United States, although in some instances, media organizations are government owned or controlled. Media corporations are concerned with making a profit, while media organizations owned or controlled by the government may be invested in educating the public or serving the interests of the government itself.

**FIGURE 10.1 ■ Mobile Technology, Internet, and Social Media Use More Common in Advanced Economies**




*Source:* Pew Research Center. (2018). Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q44, Q45, Q46, Q47. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/05/smartphone-ownership-is-growing-rapidly-around-the-world-but-not-always-equally/

*Note:* Internet users are defined as people who say they use the Internet at least occasionally, own a smartphone, or use social media websites like Facebook or Twitter. Percentages are medians based on 18 advanced economies and nine emerging economies.

Regardless of the purpose of the particular media organization, revealing how gender is a part of these behind-the-scenes activities is an important part of understanding the gendered content these organizations produce. For example, women have made significant strides in their representation in the advertising industry, where they now make up about 60% of all professional positions in agencies (Dan, 2016). Women hold about 50% of upper-management positions in advertising, though they still lag behind in the creative areas of the industry. Looking at the gender makeup of formal organizations like advertising agencies is one way to approach an investigation of gender and the media.

The second way to approach the study of gender and the media focuses both on the actual media content that gets produced and on what exactly people do with that content. In this approach, we shift from behind the scenes to the actual stuff that's on the television, the movie screen, the magazine page, or the computer screen. Many theories from within sociology, feminism, and cultural studies help to interpret the gendered messages contained in television, the movies, advertising, and magazines. This content-focused perspective is obviously connected to the first approach, but it also assumes that once media content is created, it takes on a life of its own.

Exactly what the people who wrote, produced, directed, and acted in a particular television commercial intended to say about gender is less important once the commercial hits the airwaves. The meaning they originally intended may or may not be successfully conveyed, and this is why it is also important to ask what people do with media content. Exactly how do people make sense of the gendered messages being produced? Do people blindly and unthinkingly absorb the gender messages broadcast to them through the media? Do they largely ignore those messages? Or do they use those messages in creative ways, decoding media content in a way that conforms to what they already thought and believed to be true about gender and the way it works in the world?

As we'll see later in our examination of different theories about the media and its relationship to gender, these two approaches are necessarily connected. Any assumptions you make about how gender operates behind the scenes in media organizations are going to affect the assumptions you make about the media content produced by those organizations. On the other side of the equation, the ways in which you imagine people use and make sense of media content will also influence how you identify the messages being sent by that particular media form. For simplicity, we'll separate these different sides of the dialogue among media organizations, media content, and media audiences but keep the more complicated relationships between all three in mind.

## Behind the Scenes: The Gender of Media Organizations

We'll begin our examination of the relationship between gender and the media with a look at what goes on inside media organizations. Gender shapes the structure of these organizations as well as the interactions that take place inside them, and therefore, gender is an important part of the picture before any television show ever airs, magazine gets published, or album gets released.

### Women Making Movies

Like almost all businesses, media organizations face a set of gender problems related to sex segregation in the workplace, the gender wage gap, and the glass ceiling. In the world of advertising and public relations, women face a glass ceiling that prevents them from rising to higher levels of management and a kind of segregation that confines them to work on products considered to be more feminine. In their research on gender among television writers and screenwriters, Denise D. Bielby and William T. Bielby (1992, 1996) suggested that some of the features of these popular-culture industries intensify the ways in which gender stereotypes are employed, making them perhaps even worse than in other occupations and industries.

One of the more obvious of these features is that both industries—television and film—are dominated by men, especially at the most powerful levels and positions. Of the 51 top-grossing feature films released in 2021, only 13% were directed by women, and only three directors were women of color. The percentage of women directors across all films released by major studios and mini-major companies in 2021 was 13.7%, which was significantly lower than 2020 (22.2%), but still higher than 2019 (15%). The gains in number of women directors is uneven but still holding, but it still produces a gender ratio of 6.3 male directors to every female director (Women and Hollywood, 2021).

Women do somewhat better in movies released on streaming service such as Amazon Prime, Netflix, and HBO. At Amazon, more than a third of directors were women (37.5%), with more than a quarter at Disney+ (29%), 19.5% at HBO Max, and 18.1% at Netflix. Amazon Prime also had a significantly larger number of women of color directing compared to top-grossing movies released in theaters, at 15% (Women and Hollywood, 2022).

Statistics show that it very much matters when women are in positions of power for the opportunities available to other women. Across all television platforms, programs with at least one woman creator had more women in key behind-the-scenes positions as well as more women characters in major and speaking roles than on programs with no woman creator. In films, when men were the only directors and/or writers, the percentage of females who were major characters was 33% compared to films where a woman had a directing and/or writing role, where the number rose to 41%. In films with at least one woman as a director and or/writer, women made up 44% of protagonists, whereas in films with solely male directors and/or writers, women were only 18% of protagonists(Women and Hollywood, 2021).

Another feature that contributes to the role gender plays in these areas is the high-risk nature of both industries. Of the thousands of television pilots written and shows proposed, few make it into a network executive's office, even fewer make it onto the air, and only a miniscule number become successful shows that run for more than one season. The same funneling process occurs in the film industry, where the 50,000 scripts or script treatments registered with the Writers Guild each year compare to only 150 that are sold to a studio, which in itself is no guarantee the script will ever become a film (Freshman Screenplay, 2022). In this risk-averse world, Hollywood blockbusters are increasingly dominated by superhero movies, and this genre is even less likely to include women both behind the scenes and on the big screen. On superhero and sci-fi films only 12% of key behind-the-scene positions were held by women (Women and Hollywood, 2018). Given these numbers, studios are averse to taking any risks, such as producing the first action movie written by a woman screenwriter.

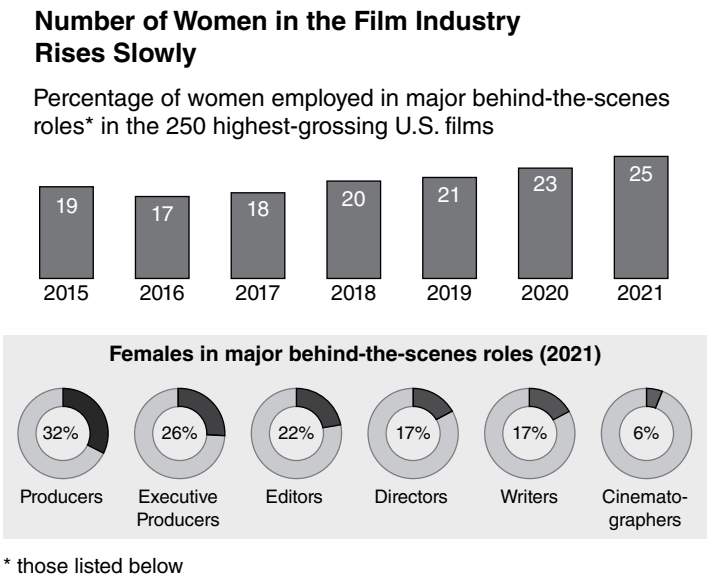
Figure 10.2 explores women's representation across film and TV.

These television and film industry statistics translate into a situation that makes gender an important component of decision-making processes. Callie Khouri, who won an Academy Award for her screenplay for the feminist-styled buddy movie *Thelma and Louise*, explained the ways in which gender can affect a screenwriter's career:

> There is a certain stigma, I think that there is a set of expectations that women write a certain type of picture, so you don't look for an action movie that's written by a woman. You don't look for a thriller. There are certain types of movies that you don't expect to be written by a woman. People still call things "women's pictures." If it has a female audience then there is always a somewhat derogatory connotation to a so-called woman's picture. (Bielby & Bielby, 1996, p. 249)

Another female screenwriter described the ways in which studio executives and producers are simply not comfortable with women pitching scripts for action movies, as action movies are perceived as more masculine. Studio executives have certain performance expectations about women and men. Confining women to a select genre of movies (romantic comedies or other "women's pictures") reduces the range of possible movie scripts they

**FIGURE 10.2 ■ Number of Women in the Film Industry Rises Slowly**




*Source:* Statista. (n.d.). Celluloid Ceiling Study by San Diego State University.

can write. It also makes female screenwriters more vulnerable to the ever-shifting trends in television and film; if the blockbuster films of that particular period tend to be action movies or thrillers, women confined to writing romantic comedies will find it even more difficult to get their movies produced.

## The Bechdel Test

Given the lack of women's representation at the top levels of the movie industry, it's probably not surprising that many Hollywood films fail a basic test of active gender representation. The Bechdel, or the Bechdel-Wallace Test, is a set of criteria first portrayed in the comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, by Allison Bechdel, in 1985 (GrrlScientist, 2010). To pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test, a movie must have two female characters, each of whom has a name, who have a conversation with each other about something other than a man. The original idea for the Bechdel-Wallace Test extends back to Virginia Woolf's famous essay about women and art, *A Room of One's Own*. The criteria seem to set a relatively low bar for movies—the rules say nothing about whether the female characters are strong or active or feminist. Yet the list of movies that fail to pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test is outstanding and includes most of the iconic films of the 20th century. Some studies suggest that only 50% of movies made between 1974 and 2015 pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test. This glaring lack of women's representation in most films is connected to the ways in which women are underrepresented in the social institutions that make up the world of filmmaking, even though this hasn't always been the case.

### Gender and the History of Screenwriting

The case of screenwriters is especially interesting regarding gender in the world of moviemaking because it is one of the few professional occupations that has experienced a transition from predominantly women to predominantly men. In the early days of the silent film industry in Hollywood, many of the most successful *scenarists*, as screenwriters were called during that period, were women (Bielby & Bielby, 1996). Hard statistics for the period are difficult to come by, but some estimates suggest that during the silent film era (from the 1900s to 1927), women made up somewhere between 50% and 90% of all scenarists. The highest-paid writer of the 1920s was Frances Marion, whose career extended into the era of sound movies, or *talkies*. Because of their predominance, these women scenarists were responsible for establishing many of the narrative forms and scenarios essential to the structure of films and, therefore, influenced the basic idea of what makes a movie a movie today.

Women were displaced by men in the film industry as the innovation of sound in movies increased the importance of storytelling, thereby raising the prestige and desirability of screenwriting jobs. Under the growing studio system, the conception, writing, production, and distribution of movies were centralized under the control of a few large studios. The job of screenwriting was rationalized along with the process of production in general because story departments in major studios became responsible for finding literary material that could be turned into movies as well as for writing the screenplays for those studios. Some women in this new era, such as Frances Marion, were able to hold onto their jobs, and Marion was a founding member and the first vice president of the Screen Writers Guild (now the Writers Guild of America). But the transition from women to men was nearly complete by the 1930s, with women making up only 15% of working screenwriters. In this new landscape, women became responsible not for writing scripts but for helping to write "women's films," writing dialogue for female actors, or generally adding a "woman's angle" to films. Today, women make up 35% of employed development/pilot writers and 30% of employed screenwriters (Women in Hollywood, 2020).

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 10.1

### GENDER, RACE, AND SEXUALITY IN SHONDALAND

Though women still lag behind men in the world of television and film, prime-time powerhouse Shonda Rhimes has made a serious impact for women and African Americans in television and entertainment. Rhimes writes, directs, and produces three of the most successful shows on ABC—*Grey's Anatomy, Scandal* (series ended in 2018), and *How to Get Away With Murder*. Her career demonstrates how women and people of color in positions of power in the media can make a real difference to the reality reflected back to us on our television screen. Both *Scandal* and *How to Get Away With Murder* feature Black women as leads. The casts of all Rhimes's shows are more diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexual orientation than average television fare. Rhimes uses her shows as forums to confront issues such as sexual assault and gender discrimination in the workplace while maintaining widespread

popularity. Her portrayal of gay and lesbian sex scenes has allowed her to challenge heterosexism in ABC's Broadcast Standards and Practices, the department responsible for making decisions about the moral, ethical, and legal implications of what the network airs. In an interview, Rhimes explained:

It is interesting to me that we've done some scenes that were shot-for-shot the exact same scene as a scene that had a man and a woman in it and had to fight for the scene if it had two people of the same sex in it—fought and won but had to fight. (Rhimes, 2015)

Do you think the success of shows like these will encourage other television writers, producers, and directors to include more diversity in regard to gender, sexual identity, and race?

Women make up 35% of television writers partly because the risks associated with producing a television show are slightly lower than those for movie production, as producing a television show costs considerably less than producing a film. But gender becomes a part of the structure of television in different ways than it does within the movie industry. For example, the very way in which television networks have traditionally structured the scheduling and content of their programs is based on gender assumptions, assumptions that may be increasingly inaccurate reflections of the new gender reality. Even with the advent of on-demand viewing, television networks still divide their programming into daytime, prime time, and late night, reflecting their beliefs about who is at home and watching television during those periods.

Daytime television includes genres—soap operas and game shows—assumed to be directed toward women, following the assumption that women are more likely to be home and watching television during the day. Prime time reflects the assumption that men come home and spend their evenings watching television, presumably along with their wives and children (Watkins & Emerson, 2000). This gendering of television is reflected in the structure of media organizations, where networks have separate development divisions for drama, comedy, daytime, and news (Bielby & Bielby, 1996). Female executives in television are more likely to be confined to "feminine" divisions, supervising female-typed genres such as television movies and miniseries, children's programming, and daytime programming. This gendered structure of television networks as media organizations continues for the major broadcast networks despite the fact that fewer and fewer women but increasing numbers of men are at home taking care of children during the daytime.

Limiting women's opportunities to have their screenplays made into movies or confining them to working with certain types of television shows has obvious effects on the gender content of the media that these organizations produce. Some Hollywood insiders have suggested that the decline in female top executives at major studios affects the types of movies that get produced and released (Waxman, 2007). Namely, the few women producers have to fight to get movies that might appeal to a predominantly female audience made in what has been described by one female producer as a "boys' era" in movies. Lynda Obst, the producer of films such as *Hope Floats* and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, described having to fight hard to keep Disney from canceling her production for a remake of *Adventures in Babysitting*, another movie geared toward female audiences.

Sherry Lansing, the former chairwoman at Paramount, suggested that many women leave the top studio jobs because of both the difficulty of wedding these careers with love and family and the subtle shift in focus from quality content in films to the box office bottom line. Realizing that they probably can't make the kinds of character-driven movies they'd like, with social and political content, on top of the 6-a.m.-to-11-p.m., six-days-a-week schedule, leads many women to choose having a life over their high-powered careers, according to Lansing. She said, "Women want to be in love. A huge percentage want children. They want friends. They want life" (as quoted in Waxman, 2007). Other women in the movie business suggest that women at lower levels of the studio system suffer from a lack of support, preventing them from ever moving up the ranks to the top positions. Regardless of the underlying reasons, many believe the situation for women in movie studios may be getting worse, not better, and that this will continue to affect the kinds of movies that get produced in Hollywood.

An example of the more subtle ways in which gender can influence media content comes from the world of news reporting. Carolyn M. Byerly (2004) shared her experiences with sexual harassment early in her career as a newspaper reporter in the 1960s and 1970s when one Pulitzer Prize–winning male journalist she interviewed asked her to spend the night with him after she completed the interview. In the early 1990s, Byerly worked in a newsroom in which all but one of the major gatekeepers were male and the newsroom was full of men's commentary about sports, women, and war. Working for the newspaper during the first Persian Gulf War, Byerly believed the predominantly male reporters were more interested in covering the war itself than the growing antiwar responses erupting in Seattle and around the world. In addition, coverage of "women's issues" at the newspaper rarely incorporated the perspectives of feminists or members of other women's groups who might have expertise or a different perspective. Another female reporter working with Byerly would not call staff at rape crisis centers for background on stories about sexual assault because she saw these sources as biased. One female reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* known for her aggressive style was given a jockstrap as a going-away present by her colleagues, with a note that said, "Sniff for luck."

## Gender, Advertising, and the Commodification of Gender

All of these examples from the world of television, movies, and news media demonstrate the ways in which the gender composition of a media organization can affect the gender content that gets produced. In addition, gender gets built into the very ways in which some media organizations function, as in the case of the division of television into daytime and prime time. Advertising is one part of this structure growing in importance across many types of media outlets and has important gender implications. As technologies such as Hulu, Netflix, and on-demand television make it more difficult for advertisers to reach their viewers or to compete for attention among the barrage of advertisements most people face daily, targeting advertising toward a specific group becomes increasingly important.

Gender is one type of identity marketers use in **market segmentation**, a sales approach in which corporations divide a large and diverse market for a product into smaller segments based on characteristics like gender, social class, and race, thereby creating many small, homogeneous markets. Creating advertising specifically geared toward one gender or the other is an example

of market segmentation. For example, advertisers and marketers have traditionally ignored men as potential buyers of household goods, including cleaning products and groceries (Newman, 2008). In recent years, as increasing numbers of men have begun to clean and go to the supermarket, advertisers and marketers have begun to reconsider their decisions to aim their commercials and print ads for groceries and cleaning products exclusively at women.

Advertising and marketing are an especially powerful component of the structure of many media organizations because of the way advertising works. In our consumer-driven world, advertising is no longer, as it once was, about convincing audiences that one product is better or cheaper than another. Because most of the products and services people in the developed world purchase are nonessential goods, advertising and marketing create a sense of need in consumers by convincing them that they can attain some desirable state of being by buying their product. Think back on all the things you've bought in the last few months. How many of those products or services were absolutely necessary to your survival? You may very well feel that the soy, double-shot cappuccino from Starbucks or your Spotify subscription is necessary to your survival, but you won't starve or die of thirst or exposure without the latte or music, and this is true of most of the things we purchase daily.

No one (or at least no one I can think of) actually needs an iPhone to survive. Advertisers and marketers work at convincing us not just that we should buy an iPhone because it works better than other smartphones or that we really actually need it but that owning an iPhone will make us cooler and happier. Beginning in the 1920s, advertisers increasingly began to create connections between social values and commodities, or the products they were selling. Prior to the now-famous De Beers advertising campaign reminding us that "diamonds are forever," diamonds were considered primarily to be financial investments, not symbols of romantic love and long-term marital commitment. The advertising campaign, which began in 1947, forever changed the meaning of diamonds, so that in the United States, many couples could not conceive of becoming engaged to be married without sealing the deal with a diamond (Jhally, 1995). These advertisers created an association such that buying a diamond is associated with romance, happiness, and sustained marital bliss in a specifically gendered way (so far, men do not seem to need diamonds to achieve marital bliss). Some who study popular culture and media identify this process as commodification, which means turning any object, idea, or behavior into something that can be bought and sold. With diamonds, the ideas of love, commitment, and marital bliss were commodified.

Gender becomes an important tool of advertisers and marketers when used to attract attention and persuade consumers, largely by drawing on assumptions about the ways in which we believe men and women are supposed to behave. Using gender in advertising is especially powerful for two reasons. Advertising is a highly gendered world because it reflects these often stereotypical assumptions and projections rather than offering portrayals of women and men grounded in the experiences of real people. These gender displays are intimately familiar to consumers because socialization ensures that we are all well acquainted with a detailed sense of how to enact gender norms. The second added advantage of using gender in advertising is that it allows advertisers to reach consumers through the medium of a core individual identity and one of the most fundamental ways we have of thinking about ourselves—as a woman or a man.

Being a man or a woman is an important identity for a great many people, and therefore, advertisements that allow us to feel more masculine or feminine through buying a certain product can have a powerful appeal. Gender in advertising, then, is especially effective because it's easy for consumers to recognize and highly salient to their own identities and lives (Jhally, 1995).

There's nothing necessarily wrong with using gender in advertising, but the particular ways in which many advertisers use gender begins to create a distorted picture of the world and the way gender operates in it. The complex ways in which we experience and live gender in our everyday lives and the countless variations in how gender is expressed are largely lost in advertising depictions. For example, advertisements still rarely depict working-class women and men or men and women of color, and when they do, these depictions are often negative. In her analysis of advertisements, Jean Kilbourne (Jhally & Kilbourne, 2000) identified the ways in which women of color are often depicted as animals, animalistic, or primitive. Later in this chapter, we'll discuss portrayals of working-class men as buffoons.

Even more rarely do advertisements portray gender norms that do not conform to the most traditional assumptions, regardless of whether the men and women involved are white or middle class. How many times have you seen a commercial in which a man is cooking dinner for his family (leaving out those in which he's barbecuing, which is largely considered an appropriately masculine cooking activity) compared with the number of commercials in which women cook dinner for their family? How many commercials have you seen that depict women fixing cars, using power tools, or driving large trucks as compared with the commercials in which you see men doing these things? These distortions are amplified by the connections between gender and sexuality that are increasingly used in the United States to sell products that have little apparent connection to either gender or sexuality.

In one example from Kilbourne's video, the copy for a magazine advertisement for rice read, "Whatever you're giving him tonight, he'll enjoy it more with rice," and featured a picture of a woman smiling seductively (as quoted in Jhally & Kilbourne, 2000). In this particular advertisement, a satisfying sex life was commodified and connected to an unlikely food product: rice. As the constant bombardment of advertising increases, finding some way to grab the attention of consumers amid the overall noise becomes increasingly difficult. Sexuality and use of sexuality that continually pushes the limits is one way to win the contest for consumer attention. Although this has been especially true of women's sexuality, men's sexuality is increasingly being used to sell products from clothes to cleaning products.

The primary problem that emerges in the use of gender in advertising is that these words and images begin to create an increasingly distorted sense of what is really true about gender and sexuality. One of the most powerful examples of the way in which advertising creates this distorted view of gender is through its effects on body image. This has been especially true for women, who are bombarded with images of ideal beauty as primarily white, young, and thin. But it's also increasingly true for men. In one study of the images in *Men's Health* magazine, Susan M. Alexander (2003) found a strong emphasis on white, well-toned, but not overly muscled bodies in the images on the magazine's cover. The articles inside *Men's Health* sent a message similar to that seen in women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, with their focus on fat, weight, diet, and food. The overall message of the magazine was that men should work to build and maintain a hard body,

which, although it might also be a healthy body, is important for its ability to "pull her sex trigger." The word *sex* permeates the magazine, suggesting that obtaining a hard body is important because it brings the added perk of being able to engage in dynamic sex (presumably with a woman).

Despite this emphasis on obtaining a hard body, the actual advertising content of the magazine focuses primarily on clothes and automobiles. Alexander (2003) argued that this combination of advertising and magazine content in *Men's Health* sends the clear message that automobiles are men's domain and that the correct brands of cars and clothes are important status symbols for successful masculinity. The effect of this combination of images of hard bodies and advertisements is to turn men's bodies into "walking billboards for brand-name products" (p. 550) in a manner that has been true of women and advertising for many years. Men's bodies become sexualized because of the need for men to be able to perform sexually, an important component of dominant ideals of masculinity. As we discussed in Chapter 5, men's bodies are sexualized in ways different from the sexualization of female bodies. Men are sexualized as sexual subjects, with expectations to perform, while women are sexualized as sexual objects. *Men's Health* reinforces these messages about masculine sexuality.

The central role of advertising in driving the structure and functioning of media organizations is an important part of the behind-the-scenes component of the relationship between gender and the media. The need to attract attention through advertising drives media organizations to use gender in ways that create a distorted view of gender. Shifting our attention to the content of these advertisements as well as the media that goes along with them moves us from our consideration of media organizations themselves and toward the second approach to gender and the media—the content of the messages produced by the media and the question of what consumers and viewers do with those messages. Exploring this particular approach to gender and the media raises questions about exactly how we make sense of what television, movies, the Internet, popular music, and magazines are telling us about gender, and here, it's useful to explore several theoretical perspectives on those questions.

## The Gender of Instagram

In 2022, the terrain of marketing and advertising is changing as social media becomes one of the primary avenues for selling products to people. More and more products are sold to us on social media platforms, either through targeted ads or influencers. Though the rise of influencers took a hit during the pandemic, when it became impossible or harder to do things like travel or go to restaurants, by 2021, influencer marketing was on the rebound.

The idea of people who can influence large groups through their celebrity and charisma isn't a particularly new phenomenon. In 2019, the pope tweeted that the Virgin Mary was the first influencer, and as early as Shakespeare's lifetime, people were worried about the potential dangers of influencing (Scott, 2019). Social media influencing specifically took off in the 2010s, driven in part by the creation of Instagram. While in 2000, only half of U.S. adults were on the Internet, by 2021, it was 84%. Bloggers had already paved the way by endorsing products on their websites (Brenner, 2021).

Early-adopter influencer accounts on Instagram were able to build huge loyal followings as the number of people on Instagram grew from 100 million users in 2013 to more than a billion in 2022. It also became much more common for celebrities to be on Instagram or Twitter, making

direct communication between the famous and the rest of us easier than it had ever been. Some of that communication took the form of sponsored content or advertising. Though market research showed that users are more likely to trust influencers over celebrities, it's hard not to notice which products are being used by your favorite singer, actor, or model. By the end of the 2010s, 86% of companies were using part of their marketing budget on influencer marketing (Brenner, 2021).

Gender is, of course, important to understanding marketing and social media. Usage of different social media apps is influenced by gender. Teen girls are more likely to say they use TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat, while teen boys are more likely to use Twitch (a social media app focused on video game playing and livestreaming) and Reddit (Vogels et al., 2022). Use of Facebook is down among teens of all genders. Gender also affects how teens feel about their social media usage. The majority of teen boys and half of teenage girls say they spend the right amount of time on social media, but this sense that their social media usage is just the right amount is more common among boys than girls. Teen girls are more likely than teen boys to say they spend too much time on social media. Teen girls are also more likely than teen boys to say it would be hard to give up social media (58% compared to 49%). Figure 10.3 shows some key demographics as they relate to social media, including gender.

**FIGURE 10.3 ■ Teen Social Media Use, by Platform**

**Teen girls are more likely than boys to use TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat; teen boys more likely to use Twitch, Reddit and YouTube; and Black teens are especially drawn to TikTok compared with other groups**

*% of U.S. teens who say they ever use each of the following apps or sites*

100 90 80 70 60 50 40 30 20 10 0

| | YouTube | TikTok | Instagram | Snapchat | Facebook | Twitter | Twitch | WhatsApp | Reddit | Tumblr |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total | 95 | 67 | 62 | 59 | 32 | 23 | 20 | 17 | 14 | 5 |
| Boys | 97 | 60 | 55 | 54 | 31 | 24 | 26 | 17 | 20 | 4 |
| Girls | 92 | 73 | 69 | 64 | 34 | 22 | 13 | 18 | 8 | 6 |
| White | 94 | 62 | 58 | 59 | 32 | 20 | 20 | 10 | 16 | 5 |
| Black | 94 | 81 | 69 | 59 | 34 | 31 | 18 | 19 | 9 | 4 |
| Hispanic | 95 | 71 | 68 | 62 | 32 | 28 | 22 | 29 | 14 | 6 |
| Ages 13–14 | 94 | 61 | 45 | 51 | 23 | 15 | 17 | 16 | 8 | 3 |
| 15–17 | 95 | 71 | 73 | 65 | 39 | 29 | 22 | 18 | 19 | 7 |
| Urban | 95 | 71 | 70 | 58 | 40 | 28 | 15 | 29 | 13 | 6 |
| Suburban | 94 | 64 | 61 | 58 | 24 | 24 | 24 | 16 | 17 | 5 |
| Rural | 95 | 67 | 58 | 62 | 43 | 19 | 17 | 11 | 11 | 5 |
| *Household income* | | | | | | | | | | |
| < $30,000 | 93 | 72 | 64 | 60 | 44 | 26 | 17 | 19 | 10 | 4 |
| $30K–$74,999 | 94 | 68 | 62 | 57 | 39 | 24 | 19 | 19 | 13 | 7 |
| $75,000+ | 95 | 65 | 62 | 60 | 27 | 22 | 21 | 17 | 16 | 4 |

*Source:* Pew Research Center. (2022). Survey conducted April 14–May 4, 2022. Teens, social media and technology 2022. Author.

*Note:* Teens refer to ages 13 to 17. Not all numerical differences between groups shown are statistically significant. Those who did not give an answer or gave other responses are not shown. White and Black teens include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanic teens are of any race.

Gender is also an important factor in the world of influencers. A recent study found that even though women make up the majority in the influence marketing niche, men still earn more. In other words, the gender wage gap discussed in Chapter 9 extends into the world of social media marketing. According to the study, women account for 85% of the sponsorships made as influencers. But men still make 30% more than women at an average of $2,978 per post. For the past five years, male influencers have been the highest paid despite their smaller presence in the area. The one exception is in the area of Instagram stories, where women earned an average of $962 per post compared to men's $609 (Dias, 2022).

Another study found that in addition to women influencers being paid less than men, brands also tend to invest more in ads that reinforce traditional gender norms. In advertising specifically for consumer packaged goods (disposable goods like food and other household products), 58% of characters were women compared to 41% who were men. Of those female characters, though, only 44% were shown in professional settings, and those ads received nearly half the spending when compared to the frequency with which they appeared. Ads with men appearing in professional settings appeared 41% of the time but received almost double the ad spending (Karlovitch, 2022).

## MEDIA POWER THEORY: WE'RE ALL SHEEP

There are two theories about the social impact of the media from the disciplines of sociology and cultural studies that help us understand how gender becomes part of the pop culture we consume. Because there are important connections between the structure of media organizations and the media content they produce, these theories also have something to say about the media organizations themselves. The first theory focuses on media power and was developed primarily by Theodor Adorno, a sociologist who was part of a group of German, Jewish intellectuals who fled to Los Angeles and New York when the Nazis rose to power in Germany in the 1930s (Gauntlett, 2002). Adorno, like other intellectuals in this group that came to be known as the Frankfurt School, was deeply affected by witnessing firsthand the ways in which the Nazis used the media to spread propaganda in Germany. These experiences influenced the **media power theory** Adorno developed, in which he described the "culture industry" as a "well-oiled machine producing entertainment products in order to make a profit" (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 20).

To describe media organizations as industries doesn't seem very shocking to us, but Adorno and his counterparts in the Frankfurt School were deeply disappointed that the making of culture had become subject to the same rules of mass production used to produce cars and other manufactured goods. Under this system, culture ceases to be something made by "the people"; rather, it becomes something imposed from above and churned out by industrial entities like the studio system in Hollywood and television networks. Under this system, culture can no longer be called art—it becomes another commodity, exactly like a car, a bar of soap, or a refrigerator; culture becomes something that exists merely to be bought and sold. Given this view of how the **culture industry** works, it's not surprising that Adorno had a pretty dismal view of the quality of the media it produced.

According to those in the Frankfurt School, all the media products of the culture industry are essentially "exactly the same" in the sense that they all embody the particular values of the established system (Gauntlett, 2002, pp. 20–21). Any potentially transgressive modes of expression are inevitably absorbed by the culture industry so that what might have been a rebellious act becomes just another way of contributing to the status quo.

Pop star Beyoncé may call herself a feminist and sample writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's words in her music. But her feminism and messages about women's empowerment didn't keep thousands of consumers from buying her music. According to the Frankfurt School perspective, consumers may have believed they were being transgressive or rebellious by listening to Beyoncé, but in reality, they were merely giving their full support to the status quo of the consumer society in which they live; rebellion through the consumption of mass-produced art is simply not real rebellion for Adorno and the other members of the Frankfurt School.

The wide variety of styles and forms of entertainment available in today's consumer society may look different, but they merely ensure that no one truly escapes the grip of the culture industry. Television and cable networks, movie studios, magazine publishers, and websites all provide us with a set of choices, but the range of those choices is always controlled by the media organizations themselves. From the viewpoint of the culture industry, television shows, movies, and magazine articles consist largely of interchangeable elements that are reused over and over again. Adorno would be skeptical as to whether the culture industry really ever produces anything that can legitimately be called new, let alone anything that can be called art (Gauntlett, 2002).

Given their perspective on how the culture industry works and the quality of the media these organizations produce, Adorno's view on the impact of the media should come as no surprise. From the perspective of Adorno and others in the Frankfurt School, the main effect of the media on its audience is to cultivate a kind of overall passivity. The content of popular culture forms such as television, movies, and, increasingly, the Internet are less important than the amount of time and energy these media outlets consume in our everyday lives. Our favorite TV show or Internet site may very well bring us enjoyment and, from time to time, may spark an interesting conversation with fellow viewers. But on the whole, our participation in media culture teaches us to conform to the status quo without even questioning what that status quo is or why it exists. According to Adorno (1991), the culture industry creates a world in which "conformity has replaced consciousness" (p. 90). From the perspective of the Frankfurt School, then, the culture industry produces banal media content that turns its audience into passive, conformist sheep.

So do you feel like a sheep? Most of us would probably say no, although Adorno (1991) would argue that because of false consciousness, sheep are never really aware that they are, in fact, sheep. **False consciousness** is an idea that comes from Karl Marx's theory of class relations but has been used in other contexts to explain gender and race relations. The basic idea of false consciousness is that some institutions (in this case, the culture industry) can exert enough power over the way people think to mislead them about the true state of affairs and, usually, about relations of power in a society. False consciousness, in a very *Matrix* kind of way, leads you to believe you know things that are not, in fact, actually true.

In the case of Adorno (1991) and the culture industry, false consciousness means that the media, in addition to turning us into passive, conformist sheep, accomplishes the neat trick

of convincing us that the media really has no influence on us whatsoever. You don't feel like a sheep, but you wouldn't notice it anyway because the culture industry has done such a good job of creating a sense of false consciousness and, therefore, of convincing you that you're not a sheep at all. This concept has been applied to gender as well. Women who claim that they experience no oppression in a male-dominated society are victims of false consciousness who have had the wool pulled over their eyes by the institutions of a patriarchal society. But there is also the possibility that we may not be sheep after all, and John Fiske's (1989) theory of audience power gives us one perspective from which to make that argument.

## Audience Power Theory: Power to the People

John Fiske comes from a background in cultural studies and communication rather than from sociology, and in his book, *Understanding Popular Culture*, he begins by rather emphatically rejecting many of the ideas of Adorno and the Frankfurt School. On the subject of media organizations and their relationship to their audiences, Fiske (1989) argued that "popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry" (p. 24). Fiske made this argument by shifting his emphasis from the structure or motives of the culture industry to the ways in which real people use the texts and media produced by the culture industry. The television show produced by some network or cable station cannot be considered without also examining how people make sense of that show, its characters, and the messages it sends.

This theory is called **audience power theory** because Fiske puts the power to determine the popularity of any given media content squarely in the hands of the people making informed decisions about what they like and don't like. According to the theory of audience power, we are not sheep but consumers capable of decoding and interpreting the media we see and hear to suit our own unique needs and lives and then making decisions about whether that particular media is something in which we'd like to participate.

### THINK ABOUT IT

*If you believe in the idea of false consciousness as it relates to gender, it follows that any men or women who claim that gender does not affect their lives at all are misguided victims of false consciousness. What are problems with using this concept? How would you feel about being told you were a victim of false consciousness? If you buy this concept, how do you help people to understand gender "reality" as it really is? And how do you ever know for sure that you're not a victim of false consciousness?*

Fiske (1989), like Adorno, acknowledges that power has a role to play in examining the workings of the media. The production of media content does take place within a "determining framework of power relations" (p. 58), but in some ways, Fiske argues that the "meaning" of any media product is always escaping from whatever the preferred or intended meaning of its

creators may have been. For example, the advertisers, writers, directors, and actors who all cooperated to create a certain television commercial may have one **preferred meaning** for that commercial while they are engaged in the process of its creation. For example, in 2011, Dr Pepper launched its Dr Pepper Ten, a 10-calorie diet drink, with an ad campaign announcing the drink was "not for women" (Kain, 2011). In one spot in the campaign, a laser gun–wielding commando tells the viewers, "You can keep the romantic comedies and lady drinks. We're good." The preferred meaning of this commercial may have been to overcome the attitudes marketing research told the advertisers that men have toward diet drinks—that they're for women.

But even media content as seemingly simple as a diet soda commercial contains what Fiske (1989) calls an **overspill of meanings** and, therefore, the possibility for viewers to create their own alternative or resistant meanings. As a viewer of the Dr Pepper commercial, you may read its message as a sexist attempt to reinforce rigid gender roles for women and men. Or you may decide that the message being sent by this commercial is that masculinity is so fragile as a gender identity that even contemplating taking a sip of a regular diet drink threatens it. Or you might just decide that the commercial is making fun of men in general. There are countless other meanings any number of viewers might glean from any particular commercial, television show, movie, magazine, song, or Internet site, but according to Fiske, most of those will not match up perfectly with the particular meaning the creators of the media content originally intended for the audience to receive. In this sense, the power to determine what media content means is not solely in the hands of the media organizations that create the media content (Gauntlett, 2002).

## TRANSGENDER IN THE MEDIA

Media power theory and audience power theory draw our attention to a consideration of where the real control lies in the creation of media content. From a media power perspective, the media is a culture industry concerned only with profit. The Internet, television, video games, and other digital content are mass-produced to keep us distracted from the real problems of the world. As such, we would expect the media to support the gender status quo. But if we consider the audience power perspective, there's room to create our own gender meanings. The power lies not with the big media corporations alone but also with us as potentially critical media consumers. How do these dynamics play out when we turn our attention to the way gender is depicted in the media?

Let's start our consideration not with the question of how women and men are depicted in the media as two separate groups of people. Instead, let's look at what messages the media sends in general about the nature of gender. Is gender assumed as a given? Is it immutable? Is gender a barrier that cannot be crossed? Does the depiction of gender in the media reinforce sexual dimorphism, the belief that there are two and only two sexes—male and female? One place to begin thinking about these types of questions is to consider how the media depicts transgender individuals.

In 2015, the transgender community made major headlines when former Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner publicly transitioned to a woman—Caitlyn Jenner's reality TV series, *I Am Cait*, ran two seasons and documents Jenner's life posttransition. But even before Jenner's

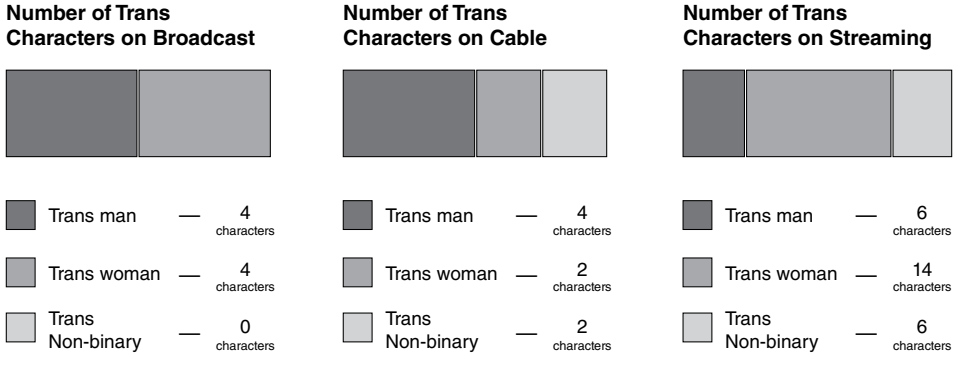
announcement, transgender people had made significant inroads in their depiction in the media. In 2005, *Desperate Housewives* actress Felicity Huffman starred in the independent film *Transamerica*, which humorously detailed the experiences of a male-to-female (MTF) transgender woman on her cross-country journey with her newly discovered son. More recently, Laverne Cox brought the experiences of transgender women into the public spotlight through her role in the hit Netflix series, *Orange Is the New Black*. In 2014, a new series, *Transparent*, debuted on Amazon Video, detailing the life of a California family whose father has transitioned from Mort to Maura.

A 10-year study of transgender depictions in television conducted by GLAAD (the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) revealed 102 episodes and nonrecurring storyline depictions of transgender characters in scripted television (GLAAD, 2012). GLAAD's 2022 report on transgender representation on television revealed a slight increase in the number of transgender characters at 42. Twenty of those characters were transgender women, 14 were transgender men, and 8 were nonbinary (GLAAD, 2022).

Transgender people may be more visible in the media, but how are they depicted when they do appear on television? Of the 102 depictions in the GLAAD study, 54% were categorized as containing negative depictions, 35% ranged from "problematic" to "good," and only 12% were considered to be groundbreaking, fair, and accurate. Transgender characters were depicted as villains 40% of the time, and at least a fifth of all transgender characters were depicted as sex workers. Antitransgender slurs, language, and dialogue were present in at least 61% of the depictions. Transgender characters were depicted as killers or villains in 21% of the depictions. This research demonstrates that though the representation of transgender individuals may have increased, they are still largely seen as either victims or villains much of the time in the world of television. Figures 10.4 and 10.5 explore the demographics of transgender depictions on TV.

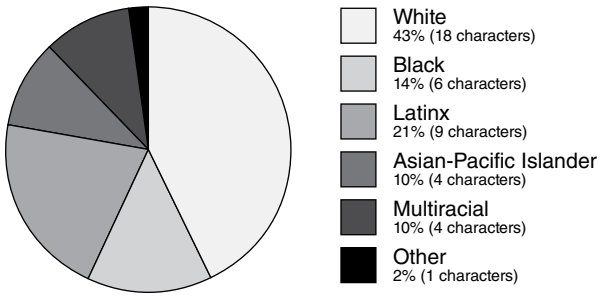
Other transgender activists have criticized Hollywood's unreflective and clumsy decisions to generally use cisgender individuals to play transgender roles. In *Transparent*, the transgender character is played by cisgender actor Jeffrey Tambor, and in 2013's *Dallas Buyer's Club*,

**FIGURE 10.4 ■ Number of Trans Characters on Broadcast, Cable, and Streaming**


Number of Trans Characters on Broadcast
Trans man — 4 characters
Trans woman — 4 characters
Trans Non-binary — 0 characters
Number of Trans Characters on Cable
Trans man — 4 characters
Trans woman — 2 characters
Trans Non-binary — 2 characters
Number of Trans Characters on Streaming
Trans man — 6 characters
Trans woman — 14 characters
Trans Non-binary — 6 characters

*Source:* GLAAD Media Institute. (2022). Where we are on TV (2021-2022). https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD%20202122%20WWATV.pdf

**FIGURE 10.5 ■ Racial Diversity of Transgender Characters**




*Source:* GLAAD Media Institute. (2022). Where we are on TV (2021-2022). https://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD%20202122%20WWATV.pdf

cisgender actor Jared Leto played Rayon, a transgender woman. Using cisgender actors to play transgender roles continues Hollywood's tendency to play out narratives of marginalized groups through the lens of the dominant group. For example, stories about people of color in Hollywood movies are often told through the perspective of a white character. *The Help* is a recent example of a trend that dates back as far as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where the story of Black people's lives is filtered through a white hero. As Raquel Willis (2015) points out, when Hollywood films don't use trans actors, they effectively commandeer trans narratives. For transgender people deprived of authentic representations of themselves, having a trans actor in a role is one small step toward creating a truer depiction of trans experiences.

Willis (2015) points out that without the participation of transgender people in the narratives being created about them, the stories tend to fall into the same trope—man in a woman's dress. In fact, the experiences of the transgender community are much more diverse. Trans men, or people who were assigned female at birth but whose gender identity is masculine, are rarely depicted in the media. *Transparent* includes one trans man character—Dale—played by trans actor Ian Harvie. Research suggests that the experience of trans men can be very different from that of trans women, but their stories have been rendered largely invisible in the media.

In addition, most depictions of transgender individuals focus on those who surgically transition. Not all trans individuals undergo surgery, and many may do so in a wide range of combinations—for example, top but not bottom surgery. Some transgender individuals take hormones to alter their bodies, while some do not. Not all transgender individuals understand themselves as wanting to become a different gender; some prefer to create their own gender identity that is neither woman nor man. The media have often fallen short in depicting the full and complicated diversity of transgender life, which is the experience of many marginalized groups.

There has been some progress in media depictions of transgender people and their experiences, often spearheaded when LGBTQ people are included as creators behind the scenes. *Pose* is a television show that premiered on FX in 2018. The program portrays the African American and Latino LGBTQ and gender-nonconforming ballroom scene culture in New York City in

the 1980s and early 1990s. Many of the characters are either HIV positive or living with AIDS, reflecting the epidemic faced by the LGBTQ community during this period. This ballroom culture was first depicted in the documentary by Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*, and consisted of competing "houses" that formed families of choice for African American and Latino queer people. At balls, houses hosted parties that included competitions for trophies where competitors were judged on their "walking" (performing) in drag competitions.

*Paris Is Burning* inspired one of the show's creators and writers, Steven Canals. Canals grew up as a Black, brown, and queer youth in the Bronx in the 1980s. He was in film school when he saw the documentary and got the idea for a movie that would combine the world of ballroom culture with the narrative of *Flashdance*—a story about a young, queer Black boy who moves to New York to become a dancer and gets caught up in the world of ballroom culture. It took many years before that show became a reality, and *Pose* broke records for the largest number of transgender actors in a single program, with five trans actors playing trans characters (Kaplan, 2019). Actor Billy Porter won the Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Lead in a Drama Series, becoming the first Black gay man to win the award. The same year, *Pose* was nominated for Outstanding Drama Series. In 2021, the last season during which the show aired, Michaela Jae Rodriguez became the first trans lead to be nominated for a Primetime Emmy.

Looking at the depiction of transgender people in Hollywood, media power theory would point out that it's not surprising that many depictions of transgender experiences fall short. For the culture industry, there's no obligation to represent the full spectrum of what it means to be transgender. Money is the bottom line, and so Hollywood produces whatever sells. If the most easily digestible story for audiences is a trans woman as sex worker or serial killer, that's what the media will continue to give us. Audience power theory, on the other hand, would point to the potential to take the stories the media gives us and make them our own.

## #DISABLEDANDCUTE: BODY POSITIVITY, GENDER, AND DISABILITY

Hashtag activism is one example that lines up with audience power theory, where a group uses a hashtag to increase visibility about an issue or potentially change the narrative on that topic. The #disabledandcute hashtag, started in 2017 by then-26-year-old journalist Keah Brown, is one example that focuses specifically on how society views disabled bodies.

As with other marginalized groups, people with disabilities are underrepresented in media and popular culture. Though 1 in 4 people in the United States (26%) have a disability of some kind, only 3.1% of characters on television are disabled (Brevig, 2022). In children's TV, representation is even worse, with less than 1% of characters depicted as disabled. When disabled characters are depicted on television, more than 95% are played by nondisabled actors (Brevig, 2022).

When disabled people are portrayed in film and television, their portrayals tend to be stereotypical and one-dimensional. Disability activist Stella Young (2012) named much of the depiction of disabled people as inspiration porn. **Inspiration porn** refers to the depiction of disabled people (often doing ordinary things) being used to produce positive effects, such as inspiration or motivation, in nondisabled people (Hill, 2022). Inspiration porn emphasizes disability

as an obstacle to be overcome and positions people with disabilities as existing simply to provide uplifting stories for the able-bodied. It's similar to another trope in the portrayal of disabled people, **the super crip**, in which disabled people are either attributed with super human abilities or "praised excessively for relatively ordinary achievements" (Collin Barnes, 1992, np).

When we combine disability with gender, new dynamics and stereotypes emerge. Women and girls with disability find it difficult to fit within dominant narratives about femininity and beauty. Disability scholars and activists call this **culture disablement** to describe what occurs when disabled women are excluded from normative beauty discourses and the aforementioned assumption that disabled women are unwilling or unable to ascribe to cultural standards of beauty (Ellis, 2015).

In other words, women with disabilities are not perceived as fitting beauty standards because of their disabilities. Additionally, disabled girls especially are likely to be seen as happiness objects. Happiness objects are people who cause happiness and help to move nondisabled people in the correct way through educating them and helping them to become more tolerant and understanding (Ahmed, 2010, p. 41). Disabled girls exist to make nondisabled people feel good about themselves as well as teaching them about ableism. Though it is important for nondisabled people to learn about ableism, it's not the job of girls with disabilities to teach them.

In her analysis of Tweets using the #disabledandcute hashtag, Sarah Hill (2022) explores the power and limits of love your body (LYB) discourses as they apply to women and girls with disability. The selfie plays a central role in love your body discourses as a tool for building body confidence, or "selfie esteem" (Gill & Elias, 2012). The selfie is seen as a tool of empowerment, allowing the subject to change her relationship to her body and see herself in new ways. For disabled girls and women, the selfie contrasts with "the stare," which they may often find themselves subjected to. Rosmarie Garland-Thomson (2000) identifies staring as "the ritual social enactment of exclusion from the imagined community of the fully human" (p. 335). Selfies potentially allow girls and women with disabilities to regain the agency and humanity that's lost with the de-humanizing gaze of the stare.

Tweets using the #disabledandcute hashtag in Hill's study walked a fine line between celebrating their bodies by asserting their cuteness while acknowledging the pain, need for medication, and everyday trials of living in an ableist world. The "ragged" edges of living with a disability were softened in posts through the use of selfie filters or excluding the more visible signs of their disability (a wheelchair) from the selfie. Those using the hashtag may have found themselves constrained by another ideal applied to those with disabilities, the happy disabled identity. To conform to the happy disabled identity, people with disabilities are pressured to appear outwardly content in order to reassure others that their experience of disability is not terrible. Like the super crip and inspiration porn, people with disabilities are pushed to present identities and images designed to reassure nondisabled people.

Sitting at the intersection of two oppressed identities—gender and ableism—those using the hashtag admitted to struggling with fully embracing their own "cuteness" in the face of internalized ableism as well as other identities layered on top of their status as a disabled woman or girl. Posters would describe themselves in captions as "sorta" cute, "trying to be cute," or "maybe" cute (Hall 8). One contributor explicitly acknowledged how difficult it is

to feel cute while battling systemic ableism, explaining how difficult it is to love oneself and feel cute "in a system where you are treated as ugly and worthless" (Hall, p.9). The hashtag originator, Keah Brown, admits in her book, *The Pretty One*, to feeling double rejection as a woman of color with a disability.

These struggles highlight the limitations of love your body discourses and of postfeminism. Postfeminism is a term used in contested and contradictory ways, but here, we refer to postfeminism as a description of a historical trend in feminism, originating in the third wave. **Postfeminism** is best illustrated by examples of "typically heterosexual, white, middle-class female achievement in male-dominated workplaces, women's ability to treat men as sexual objects, and the seemingly unfettered freedoms women enjoy in respect to career choice, parenting, and domesticity" (Rumens, 2017, p. 247). Postfeminism directs attention away from collective struggles from social justice, focusing instead on a capitalistic mode of feminism, encouraging women to see themselves as autonomous, self-reliant, and entrepreneurial agents (Liu, 2021). Postfeminism is reflected in Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* book and movement, as well as other self-help books like *#GIRLBOSS* and *The Confidence Code*, all of which focus on self-regulation and self-care instead of the real social, cultural, political and economic forces that serve as barriers to women. This emphasis on individualism, as well as postfeminism's lack of intersectionality, have both drawn criticism.

The "love your body" discourse is firmly grounded in a postfeminist mindset. The assumption is that people's relationships with their bodies have become "broken" and through self-love, those relationships can be "fixed" (Hill, 2022, p. 9). What's left out of the discussion is the system of sexism and ableism that is at the root of the "broken" relationships between many disabled girls and women and their bodies. Though asserting love for their bodies can certainly be empowering for girls and women with disabilities, it is different from collective action to change these larger systems.

## GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SLASH FICTION

We can see another example of audience power theory in the world of slash fiction. Audience power theory tells us that though there's a preferred meaning for any popular culture artifact—e.g., TV show, commercial, video game, website—there's also an overspill of meanings. If you want to see an example of that potential overspill of meanings, look no further than the world of fan fiction. Fan fiction is fiction written by and for fans on a not-for-profit basis, usually posted online for easy consumption. In fan fiction, favorite characters from TV shows, movies, video games, and literature live out alternative lives and adventures. In the fan fiction world of Harry Potter, Hermione becomes the hero instead of Harry. Or Professor Snape is a good guy instead of the villain. The possibilities are endless, including alternatives as they relate to gender and sexuality. That's where slash fan fiction comes in.

As a fan of a TV show or movie, you may be familiar with **shipping**, which means to have a general affinity for some fictional couple. If you were a fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, you might have shipped Angel and Buffy or Spike and Buffy, which means you rooted for that couple to win in the end—kind of like you would a sports team. On that particular show, you could

also ship lesbian couples—Willow and Tara or Willow and Kennedy. But what if the couple you really wanted to see together was Buffy and Willow or Xander and Spike, characters who, in the world of the show as it was broadcast, had no romantic relationship? If you ship two characters who are not obviously romantically or sexually involved in the original storyline (or the canon, in the language of fan fiction), you're moved into the world of slash.

Slash had its origins with the original *Star Trek* television series. Shortly after the series went off the air in 1969, several women began to write amateur fiction in which two of the main male characters—Spock and Kirk—were lovers. These stories focused on the emerging love affair between Kirk and Spock came to be referred to as "K/S" (Woledge, 2005). Since then, many fan communities have eroticized characters of the same sex, taking the label for this phenomenon from the "/" placed between the characters' names. **Slash**, then, is a genre of fan fiction that sexualizes or romanticizes usually same-sex media relationships. Much of slash fiction focuses on two male characters, and so some distinguish between slash (two male characters) and fem slash (two female characters).

Slash fan fiction has been going on since the 1970s and constitutes a vibrant and diverse community. Name a popular television show, film, video game, or cartoon, and there's probably slash fan fiction about it. The slash phenomenon hit the mainstream recently with *The Force Awakens* from the *Star Wars* franchise (Minkel, 2016). Fans quickly began to ship two male characters—Finn (John Boyega) and Poe Dameron (Oscar Isaac). The Poe/Finn relationship became the subject of interviews with the actors on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* and other mainstream media outlets.

As Elizabeth Minkel (2016) writes, many people being exposed to slash for the first time aren't quite sure what to make of it. Some discovering slash assume the motivation is to "make everything gay" or "make everything about emotions" (Minkel, 2016). Others see slash as an attempt by fans to influence the plot trajectory of the original popular culture narrative. That is, when fans ship Finn and Poe, their goal is to influence *Star Wars* writers and producers so that in the series' next installment, a relationship between the two men becomes part of the story. In the case of the Cartoon Network show *The Legend of Korra*, fans successfully influenced the show's creators to bring to fruition the fem ship between two women, Korra and Asami.

The desire to influence the canon may be part of the drive behind some slash fiction. But the motivation of slash can also be understood as a queering of mainstream media—to use our power as an audience to shape narratives in ways that better reflect the diversity of our experiences. Drawing on queer theory, slash brings our attention to the ways in which everything is queer—including *Star Wars*—because categories of gender and sexuality themselves are deeply flawed. Slash fiction finds the spaces within existing and often largely heteronormative narratives to create alternative versions of reality. As popular media have been sometimes painfully slow to incorporate queer sensibilities into the stories they tell, slash shipping is one way to reclaim those stories in a redemptive and potentially liberatory way.

## Super Girl Fan Fiction in China

Fan fiction that imagines relationships between boys is especially popular in many Asian countries like Japan and China. In China specifically, fan fiction falls into one of three categories

borrowed from the world of Japanese anime: "good conscious," *Yaoi/Tanbi*/boys' love (BL), and *Yuri*/girls' love (GL; Yang & Bao, 2012). "Good conscious" is roughly equivalent to het slash in English-speaking cultures, or slash that focuses on a male and female character. Boys' love is slash and girls' love is fem slash. As in the United States, fan fiction in China appears primarily in online forums. Studies suggest that much of the fan fiction in China is written by young women between the ages of 14 and 25.

Boys' love fan fiction is more popular than girls' love stories in China, but Ling Yang and Hongwei Bao (2012) studied one online forum dedicated to girls' love fan fiction surrounding a reality television show. *Super Girl* is an annual television contest broadcast in mainland China, sometimes referred to as the Chinese version of *American Idol*. Like its Western counterpart, the contest was based on singing ability, and the audience participated by voting on their favorite contestants. *Super Girl* fan fiction focuses on imagining relationships between the women contestants of the show, so it's fan fiction that centers on real people.

Scholars who study boys' love and girls' love fan fiction in China are interested in what the participation of young girls in these communities might reveal about changing ideas about gender and sexuality in Chinese culture. Academic fans have argued that these stories have the potential to challenge sexual taboos, rebel against heterosexual norms, and turn women from the objects of the male gaze into active gazers at male objects (Yang & Bao, 2012). But especially in regard to boys' love fan fiction, others have pointed out that girls and women are still largely absent from these narratives. In addition, the veneration of love between men in fan fiction doesn't always translate into tolerance or acceptance of real-life homosexuality.

In their study of the *Super Girl* girls' love fan community, Yang and Bao found evidence of resistance and hostility from the wider *Super Girl* fan community. The online forum was kicked out of a general forum dedicated to *Super Girl* fandom because of their emphasis on girls' love. Members of the community also acknowledged that participants in this online forum tended to be more feminist than the general fan fiction population. In their online interactions, the core group of women created a safe space to challenge ideas of gender and sexuality. They formed complex networks of relationships, where fellow members could be mother, father, uncle, sister, brother, boyfriend, or girlfriend to each other—even though all the members of the forums were women. They created narratives about love between the girl contestants on *Super Girl* as well as about core members of their online community. The forum served as a supportive environment for women exploring categories of sexuality and gender in popular culture.

Carving out such a space is no small feat against the backdrop of a sometimes repressive Chinese government. In 2014, reports came from China that 20 mostly young women had been arrested for writing boys' love fan fiction (Romano, 2014). The increased attention to slash fan fiction is purportedly part of a wider "Internet cleanup" undertaken by China's National Office Against Pornographic and Illegal Publications. Chinese authorities appear to have specifically targeted male/male slash fan fiction. In a video, one of the young women gave a tearful confession, making the writing of slash fiction seem equivalent to drug addiction. This suggests that regardless of how transgressive the girls themselves see boys' love fan fiction, the Chinese government views it as equivalent to pornography. Consistent with audience power theory, the case of slash fan fiction in China demonstrates the power of fans to reshape

narratives in ways that push the boundaries of gender and sexuality. The crackdown by the Chinese government also highlights the limits of the power audiences can have, especially in a society where free speech is curtailed.

## THE STRUGGLE OVER IMAGES

As identified by Adorno and the Frankfurt School, much of the power of the media as an institution lies in the ability to create a particular vision of reality. When we are bombarded with certain images and stories about any particular group of people—like transgender individuals or people with disabilities—the images and stories depicted begin to take on the force of reality. This is especially true when we are not familiar with members of that group in our everyday lives. If you've never actually met or talked with an Arab man, the only information you have about what that particular group is like may come from the images you see in movies, on the television screen, or on your computer screen. If you live in the United States, the combined effect of all those images is probably not a very flattering portrait of what Arab American men are like. Namely, based on the images and stories viewed on television shows, movies, and video games, you'd probably conclude that Arab American men are dangerous terrorists and Islamic extremists whose version of demonstrating their masculinity involves blowing up buildings as well as kidnapping, torturing, and murdering people.

### Harems and Terrorists: Depictions of Arab Americans in the Media

Of course, the terrorist depictions of Arab American men seen repeatedly in media in the United States are no more an accurate representation of what Arab American men are like than Homer Simpson is an accurate representation of what white, working-class men are like. But as we will see, Homer-like images are also recreated across many media outlets. Given this particular role of the media, much of the focus of research on the media as it relates to gender is on identifying the particular visions of reality created by various media outlets. In other words, this body of research investigates how the media perpetuates stereotypes about particular groups—a project consistent with a media power approach.

If, in the United States, the media creates a view of Arab American men as extremist terrorists, what is the image of women in the Arab world? For much of the Anglo-European world, those living in the Middle East have been viewed as exotic others, as the other half of the division between the West and the Oriental world, which originally encompassed everything not European. Early depictions of women of the Middle Eastern world were based on Europeans' exposure to stories like *One Thousand and One Nights*, and therefore, they centered on depictions of women as exotic and mysterious objects of curiosity, locked away from Western eyes in luxurious harems (Salhi, 2004). Using the image of the harem as the primary lens through which to view Middle Eastern women led to an emphasis on the sensuality and submissiveness of Arab women (Khatib, 2004). A harem, after all, is associated with sexuality, and the concept of women being confined within the physical space of the harem implies women who are passive by nature. These images of Middle Eastern women as oversexualized and submissive are similar

to the way in which those within Western culture have often depicted Asian women, particularly through the stereotype of the geisha.

As in many cases, the view of Arab women from the outside differs considerably from the portrayals of Arab women from within the Arab world. In her study of the depictions of women in Egyptian national cinema, Lina Khatib (2004) explored the connections between the media portrayals of Egyptian women and ideas about Egyptian nationalism as well as Arab nationalism more generally. Although the outside world may view Arab women in general as sexualized and passive, from the perspective of many individuals within Arab culture, women are the moral gauge for the rest of society, including Arab men. This is because of the connection in places like Egypt between women and nationalism, where women are considered to be symbols of the nation itself—whether that nation refers to Egypt specifically or to Arab nationalism more generally. When women become symbols of a nation, the representations of those women become important ways of transmitting messages about what it means to be a citizen of that particular nation. In Egyptian movies, women come to represent the values of the nation as a whole. A film about Egypt's former president depicts her as "a virtuous female who does not pose a threat to patriarchy" (Khatib, 2004, p. 73).

Given this connection between honorable, subdued femininity and Egypt as a nation, it makes sense that many Egyptians informally refer to their nation as *Umm al-Dunya* (Mother of the World). Many Egyptian movies also juxtapose the morals of Egyptian women with non-Egyptian others, thereby using gender to send messages about the superiority of their own nation. The sexual permissiveness of women from countries such as the United States and Israel is depicted in many Egyptian films to form a contrast between the values of Egyptian women and the moral depravity of countries that might be considered the enemy. These connections between national identity and gender are not unique to Egypt.

## Beware of Black Men: Race, Gender, and the Local News

This struggle over media depictions of Arab women is just one example among many in media research that explores the misconceptions of various groups perpetuated in popular culture. In the United States, studies have demonstrated how the media plays an important role in convincing the public that Black men are a dangerous group that should be avoided at all costs (Anderson, 1990; Glassner, 1999; Hogobrooks, 1993; Orbe, 1998; Staples, 2009). While local television news programs show images of Black men robbing, raping, looting, and pillaging night after night, the truth is that being an African American man is most dangerous for African American men themselves. The real consequences of these images are demonstrated in the police violence against Black men and women that led to the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2013 and its resurgence in the summer of 2020.

The media do not provide stories about the high rates of disease among African American men, including that Black men are more likely to die from chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer than are white men (Anderson, 2021). You will probably not hear on the local news that suicide rates among African American youth have risen faster than those of any other racial or ethnic group, with suicide rates among Black men between the ages of 10 and 19 increasing 60% (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2022).

We do not learn from the media that the average life expectancy for Black men in the United States is shorter than that of white men when calculated both at birth and at age 65. On average, African American men die 4 years earlier than white men (Dewes, 2021). This is true even when education, an important determinant of health outcomes, is controlled for. In one study, the life expectancy for white men with the highest levels of education was 12.9 years longer than that for Black men with similar education (Dewes, 2021). Analyses designed to calculate "lost life," or years cut off because of health challenges, reveals that educated Black men lost 12 years of life compared to 8 years lost by white men (Dewes, 2021).

African American men are portrayed as dangerous, in contrast to Asian men, who are often depicted as passive and feminine, lacking the masculine characteristics that might make them a threat to white male authority. This has not always been the case, as prior to World War II in the United States, the immigration of Chinese and Japanese men was often described as the "Yellow Peril." Asian men in California competed with white, working-class men for jobs, and there was a long history of racial animosity toward Asian immigrants as "unassimilable" and therefore incapable of joining other European immigrants in the great American melting pot. Not surprisingly, early media depictions of Asian men often cast them as the exotic villain, sometimes with sexual designs on white women. More recently, Asian men in film and television were generally depicted as action heroes but rarely as leading men with romantic interests and sex appeal. In the recent film adaptation of the Broadway musical *The King and I, Anna and the King*, Hong Kong action star Chow Yun-Fat was the romantic lead as the king of Siam, but he never actually kissed his white, female love interest, Jodie Foster. This lack of Asian men in romantic leads reflects both the current view of Asian men as asexual and effeminate and lingering fears of interracial mixing between Asian men and white women.

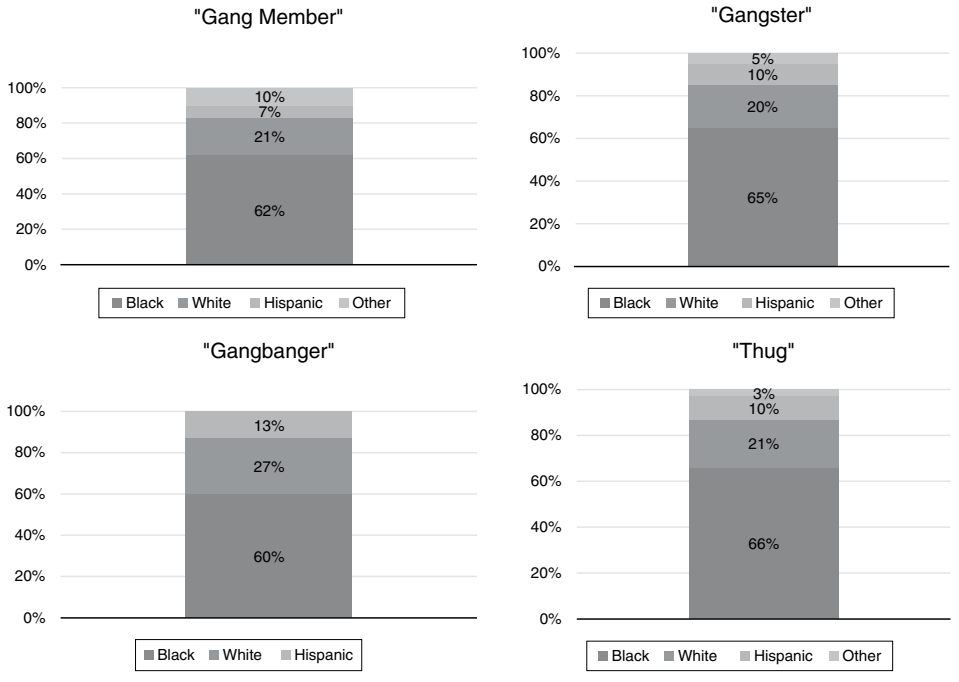
Figures 10.6 and 10.7 show some trends in the portrayals of African American men in film.

## Homer and Ralph: White, Working-Class Men on TV

Men of color are not the only men stereotyped in many media representations. Social class in the United States also forms an important area of distinction, and there is a long history in television of depicting white, working-class men as buffoons. Working-class people of both genders rarely appear on television in general, especially in the genre of situation comedies, which tend to focus on wealthy or middle-class families (Butsch, 1995). When working-class men do appear on television, they are almost universally depicted as buffoons. The **white, working-class male buffoon** as a type is shown on television as dumb, immature, irresponsible, and lacking in common sense. The proverbial television buffoon is Homer Simpson, whose ineptitude is legendary and forms the critical plot point for most of his family's misadventures—including *The Simpsons Movie*, in which Homer's incompetence single-handedly causes an environmental disaster for the entire town of Springfield.

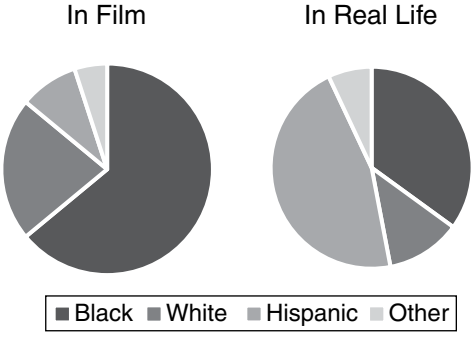
But the buffoon has been around on television since its earliest days, as seen in Ralph Kramden on *The Honeymooners*. Other versions of the buffoon include Fred from *The Flintstones*, Archie Bunker from *All in the Family*, Doug Heffernan from *The King of Queens*, and Peter Griffin from *Family Guy*. The buffoon in all these versions is typically well intentioned and sometimes even lovable, but he's never someone to imitate or respect. We may laugh at Homer Simpson and Peter

**FIGURE 10.6 ■ Black Actors Are Disproportionately Casted as Gang Members or Thugs in Movies**




*Source:* Data adapted from Crockett, Z. (2016, September 13). "Gang member" and "thug" roles in film are disproportionately played by black actors. Vox. https://www.vox.com/2016/9/13/12889478/black-actors-typecasting

**FIGURE 10.7 ■ Portrayal of Gang Members: Film vs. Reality**




*Source:* Data adapted from Crockett, Z. (2016, September 13). "Gang member" and "thug" roles in film are disproportionately played by black actors. Vox. https://www.vox.com/2016/9/13/12889478/black-actors-typecasting

*Note:* Demographics of actors who play gang members in film, compared to the actual demographics of American gangs.

Griffin, but probably few men actually want to be Homer or Peter, both of whom would be hopelessly lost without their more mature and sensible wives to save them from disaster. In contrast, men and especially father figures in middle-class situation comedies are generally perceived as wise and capable, working cooperatively with their wives to raise their almost perfect children. Think of Mike Brady from *The Brady Bunch* or Jason Seaver from *Growing Pains*. These television shows create a reality where working-class men are perceived as incompetent, while their professional and managerial male counterparts make fulfilling their role as main provider and father figure look like a breeze.

Examining these variations in how different groups are depicted in the media demonstrates some of the key insights of an intersectional approach to gender. To discuss the ways in which men as a group or masculinity in general are depicted in the media would be difficult given the stark differences in the ways in which different types of men are depicted. African American men are perceived as hypermasculine in their aggressiveness and violence, while Asian men are perceived as passive and feminized. Working-class white men are viewed as buffoons in a family dynamic in which wives and mothers are infinitely more capable than are husbands and fathers.

These examples demonstrate no single version of masculinity depicted in the media but many specific and often contradictory versions of masculinity depending on other social identities. In addition, intersectionality as a perspective draws attention to the ways in which gender is employed to enforce other types of inequality. In the case of the working-class male buffoon, showing how these men are inferior to the women in their lives is a way to demonstrate that working-class men are inferior to their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Trying to show that the normal gender status is inverted within a particular group is a way of demonstrating the inferiority of that group; working-class men are inferior because they cannot maintain the necessary dominance over their wives and other women in their lives.

## Disney, Cinderella, and Genderbent

One thing we know about how people interpret media is that it starts at a very young age. In her study of interpretive reproduction among first-grade students, Lori Baker-Sperry (2007) found that even at that young age, boys and girls had internalized the gender messages from the Disney movie *Cinderella*. **Interpretive reproduction** refers to the ways in which children are inventive and resourceful social participants in the reproduction, interpretation, and formation of their social world. This perspective on children emphasizes the ways in which children adopt, use, and transform cultural symbols as they produce and participate in peer culture. In other words, children are not just sheep passively indoctrinated by the media they consume. They are also manipulators and modifiers of those symbols.

In her research, Baker-Sperry (2007) found that both girls and boys used *Cinderella* as a way to do gender. For example, girls gained status by demonstrating their knowledge of the story and sticking to the familiar Disney version rather than deviating from it in any way. In discussing *Cinderella* with Baker-Sperry in a classroom, one girl who suggested that maybe Cinderella didn't like her fancy ball dress was quickly corrected by the other girls. Retelling the Disney Cinderella story was a way for the girls to both reinforce their position as girls and demonstrate their knowledge of the feminine world. In their discussions of *Cinderella*, girls often blurred the lines between the fantasy world of the story and their own lived experiences. Girls labeled the Cinderella story as "about them," identifying with the protagonist and imagining marrying their own prince or going to their own ball (Baker-Sperry, 2007, p. 722).

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Who were some characters from books, television, or movies that you admired as a child or aspired to be like? Were these characters the same gender as you or a different gender? How were they as gender role models? Do you think you were able to make a clear division between the fantasy of these characters and your own life?*

Boys' reaction to the Cinderella story focused instead on distancing and disdain. The boys made it clear that *Cinderella* was a "girl book," and even if they listened to the story being read, they were sure to assert that it was not the book they would have chosen. The boys were as familiar with the story as the girls, but when asked questions, their answers were most likely aimed at getting the conversation off track. For example, when Baker-Sperry (2007) asked the boys, "What is the prince like?" they said things like, "dumb," "stupid," and "a dummy" (p. 724). Boys didn't identify with Cinderella or any of the other characters in the story. They also didn't gain any status for having knowledge about the story. In fact, the opposite was true. If a boy didn't disengage from the story as Baker-Sperry read it, other boys would attempt to either engage him in their non-Cinderella conversations or look at each other to signal that the boy was not following along. For example, when one of the boys, Mark, continued to pay attention to the story, another boy said in a derogatory tone, "Mark likes *Cinderella*." Another boy who showed initial interest in the story quickly realized his mistake and spent the rest of the story repeating, "Cinderella stinks" (p. 724). Most of the boys had clearly internalized that interest in Cinderella was not appropriately masculine and patrolled other boys who might demonstrate such an interest. For both girls and boys, then, the material of Disney's *Cinderella* served as a tool for reinforcing gender norms and demonstrating their knowledge of masculinity and femininity. Though the children interpret the symbols from this fairy tale, they do so in ways that largely reinforce existing ideas about gender.

Disney animated movies have made attempts in recent years to create female heroines who are more active. Some cultural critics divide the history of Disney animated movies into two periods. The first is the domestic era; female characters such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella were portrayed as homemakers, whether cleaning up after evil stepsisters or the Seven Dwarfs. These heroines were passive and mostly waited for men—the prince—to rescue them. The second era begins with Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*; its heroines are independent rebels, seeking to free themselves from the bonds of society. Other heroines in this rebellious, new-age era include Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan. But while these heroines didn't wait for the prince to save them, they were also strangely silent. Ariel sacrifices her voice to be with the man she loves. In *The Little Mermaid* and the five Disney films that come after, women speak significantly less. Women speak only 32% of the time in *The Little Mermaid* and have 24% of the lines in *Pocahontas* and 23% in *Mulan*. In *Aladdin*, female characters have only 10% of the dialogue (Gray, 2019). Subtly, these films still reinforce gender norms, in which women literally have less of a voice than men.

Table 10.1 outlines the two eras of female heroines in Disney movies.

**TABLE 10.1 ■ Two Eras of Female Heroines in Disney Movies**

| Domestic Era | Rebellious, New-Age Era |
|---|---|
| 1937–1989 | 1989–present |
| Female characters are domestic housekeepers, often seen cleaning and in need of rescue by a man. | Female characters are more independent, trying to free themselves from the bonds of society, but also lose their voices. |
| *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) | *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998) |

The generation of people who grew up on these new-era Disney movies may not be uncritical consumers of these messages, though. On Tumblr and other social media sites, genderbent Disney characters are increasingly popular. Genderbent characters are artwork or animation in which the gender of Disney characters is changed. For example, a genderbent picture might draw Ariel as if she were a boy or the Beast (from *Beauty and the Beast*) as a girl. Like shipping pop culture characters, genderbent Disney depictions are a way to actively alter the symbols and meanings of the films, demonstrating the power audiences have to decide how they interpret the media they consume.

## MASCULINITY AND VIDEO GAMES: LEARNING THE THREE Rs

If *Cinderella* is seen as an area of expertise for little girls, what about video games? Are video games masculine territory? A common topic in conversations about the effect of the media is fears about the spread of violence in video games and what relationship that might have to real behavior. Violent video games, violent song lyrics, and violent movies have been blamed for a wide variety of real-life acts of violence, from the school shootings like those at Columbine High School in Colorado to copycat crimes like the murders committed by Benjamin James Darras and Sarah Edmondson in Mississippi in 1995, supposedly inspired by the Oliver Stone film *Natural Born Killers*. As we pointed out with the relationship between sexuality and the media, the use of violence as entertainment is nothing new to human societies. A historical perspective might draw our attention to the fact that other societies and cultures have used spectacles of real violence (gladiators in ancient Rome or medieval executions) as forms of entertainment. From this point of view, video games like *Grand Theft Auto* don't look so bad.

Nonetheless, an abundance of research has been conducted that examines the connections between the violence in video games and other media outlets and the behaviors of the individuals who consume these types of media. These questions are distinctly gendered because the audience for the most violence-prone video games is predominantly young men, even if the audience for video games in general demonstrates more gender equality. Recent surveys suggest that the audience for all types of video games—including those played on mobile devices and through social media—is increasingly equal in regard to gender. One study found that in 2019, women made up

54% of those playing computer and video games, an increase from 38% in 2006 (Gough, 2019). But many of those in the gaming industry are reluctant to include games like *Candy Crush Saga, Words with Friends*, or *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* as "real" video games. Men dominate the world of game consoles like Xbox and PlayStation, where players are 75% male. The players of sports and adventure games, from *Madden NFL* to *Duke Nukem*, are 95% male.

In his book on the culture of young men in the United States, *Guyland*, sociologist Michael Kimmel (2008) argued that many of these games are violent, misogynistic, heterosexist, and hostile toward racial and ethnic others. In one of the most notorious of this particular genre, *Grand Theft Auto*, your character, or avatar, is a criminal, and your goals are to sell drugs, build your criminal empire, and kill cops. Along the way, you can kill anyone else you want, and having sex with a prostitute in your car increases your health. You can get back the money you paid afterward by following the prostitute out of the car and killing her.

*Grand Theft Auto* is probably an extreme example of the misogyny in video games, but many adventure games in general reflect a world of hypermasculine male characters and ultrafeminine female characters. The male characters generally have bulging biceps and an upper body so out of proportion to their lower half that they would not be able to stand up as real, three-dimensional (3D) entities. The women are usually blond, with disheveled "bedroom" hair, large breasts, and tiny waistlines (Kimmel, 2008). Although a few women, like Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider*, are also the heroes, they are still highly sexualized and always heterosexual. People of color in video games are generally portrayed as part of the criminal underworld, as in *The Warriors*, which involves a multiracial street gang trying to work its way out of the Bronx.

In the world of guyland described by Kimmel (2008) in his book, young men on college campuses spend countless hours in their dorms or fraternity houses playing just these types of games or, the other growing Internet pastime, gambling online. The average kid in the United States between the ages of 13 and 18 spends 2 hours a day playing video games and about 7 hours a day interacting with some form of electronic media (Kimmel, 2008). But moving beyond the actual content of the video games themselves, the question becomes, "What exactly do these guys get out of these hours spent playing *Grand Theft Auto* or *Doom*?" Given that the primary audience for these games seems to be young and male, what is it about these games that seems to give them such a powerful masculine appeal?

Kimmel argued that for many of the young, white, male college students he interviewed, playing video games did not actually contribute to any increase in real-life violence. Rather, these video games reinforced the three Rs of the parallel education received by these men through the predominant guyland media. The first R, as described by Kimmel (2008), is **relaxation**, or an escape from the "weight of adult demands and of the rules of social decorum (also now known as political correctness)" (pp. 153–154). This is why strategy games like *The Sims* are not as popular among young males; *The Sims* involves domestic situations that are fairly close to those of the real, adult world. One sociology professor who studies video games and teaches a college course on them explained that games like *The Sims* are a little "too realistic" for the residents of guyland in that the game involves the adult world of getting a job, getting married, and having kids, which is precisely what these young men are trying to escape (Lugo, as quoted in Kimmel, 2008, p. 155).

The second R described by Kimmel (2008) is **revenge** "against those who have usurped what you thought was yours" (p. 154). Regardless of whether their perceptions are correct, many of these white, male college students feel they are victims of a world that places the needs and interests of women and people of color above their own. As this particular rule applies to video games, this revenge is accomplished through the fantasy world created within video games, where, as one 24-year-old male said to Kimmel (2008), "I can just relax, be myself and not worry about offending anyone. I can offend everyone!" (p. 150). The revenge experienced through video games takes the form of stereotypical portrayals of women who are helpless and want to be saved or minorities who are incompetent or criminals. In the extreme example of *Grand Theft Auto*, this revenge can take the form of killing these groups, but in general, the revenge provided in video games is merely a return to a world in which these young men are in complete control—even if that control is obtained through violent means.

Kimmel argued that these sentiments are encouraged among the residents of guyland by the messages sent by "guy radio" personalities like Howard Stern and Rush Limbaugh. One senior, white male college student at Vanderbilt University who had just been accepted to law school explained to Kimmel (2008) his feeling that both women and minorities with lower grades and abilities prevented him from getting into universities like Duke and the University of Virginia. He concluded by saying this:

> It's not fair. My family didn't own slaves. We're from Pennsylvania, for Chrissakes. I'm not racist; I don't care what color you are. But I shouldn't be penalized because of my race, my color, right? I mean, that's just not fair. (p. 161)

Given this sense of victimhood among many white, college-age men, one appeal of video games is to exist for a time in a world where they are clearly not the victims but are able to take some revenge on those they perceive to be their real-life oppressors. In this sense, video games also provide the final R, **restoration**. Part of the appeal of video games is the sense of control they give their players—the ability to decide what another person does, even if that person isn't necessarily real. Video games allow the men of guyland to feel they are restored to a state of power and privilege that they feel no longer exists for them outside the world of *Grand Theft Auto*.

If we are interested in what audience members do with the content produced by media organizations, the answer here is that video games are used largely to escape the real world as this particular group of young men see and understand it. Although this group of men certainly does face a world in which women and minorities are closer to a level playing field than they have ever been in U.S. history, it is important to note that there are still considerable privileges that come with being a white, heterosexual, middle-class male. Research on affirmative action policies does not support the contention that white men are the victims of discrimination because of preference policies despite the strength of this belief among many people. A 1994 survey revealed that 70% to 80% of whites believed that affirmative action sometimes discriminated against whites, while other studies demonstrated that "men are more likely to believe that a woman will get a job or promotion over an equally or more qualified man than they are to believe that a man will get a promotion over an equally or more qualified woman" (Steeh & Krysan, 1996).

This survey compares with data on the number of cases of reverse discrimination filed with the U.S. Department of Labor. **Reverse discrimination** is the perception that affirmative action policies result in discrimination against dominant groups such as whites and men. According to U.S. Department of Labor (1994) statistics, out of more than 3,000 cases, less than 2% involve charges of reverse discrimination against whites or men. In addition, research shows that most college scholarship money (72%) still goes to white students (Martin, 2011). Only 28% of scholarship money goes to minority students. So although there are few actual reports of reverse discrimination against whites or men, the belief that this type of discrimination exists and is widespread is fairly common. Regardless of the small chance that the young Vanderbilt student mentioned previously actually *was* beaten out of schools like Duke and the University of Virginia because of competition from women and minority students, his perception is that this was the case. As sociologists, we understand that those perceptions can be important and, in this instance, important enough to make the fantasy world of video games seem like a safe and relaxing escape from the world.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 10.2

### GAMERGATE AND PATROLLING THE GAMING WORLD

If you're a fan of video games (and maybe if you're not), you may have heard of Gamergate, even if you're not exactly sure what it is. In its simplest form, Gamergate is an ongoing struggle over who is allowed to participate in certain online and cultural spaces (the world of gaming) and how inclusive those spaces can become. The controversy began in 2013, when Zoe Quinn released a free online game called *Depression Quest*. The game received some positive press from video game critics, and then Quinn's ex-boyfriend wrote a series of blog posts claiming that Quinn had cheated on him with several men in the gaming industry, thereby sleeping her way to success (Dewey, 2014). In the wake of the blog posts, gamers took to Twitter, Reddit, and 4chan, condemning the critics who had given Quinn positive reviews. These protesters claimed that Gamergate is really about ethics in video game journalism, even though the protests themselves rarely focused on ethical issues. Anonymous hackers posted nude pictures of Quinn and other personal information, including her address. Quinn received death and rape threats so frightening that she fled her home and called the police. As the movement gained momentum, hackers expanded their attacks to Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist activist and media critic. Like Quinn, Sarkeesian received threats of death and rape. Like Quinn, she was forced to leave her home. The attacks expanded to other women in the gaming world, going so far as to list the women's addresses along with a specific time of attack, making the threats criminally punishable. In October 2014, Gamergate was still going strong, driving yet another woman—Brianna Wu—from her home for making jokes on Twitter about the ongoing drama. In the wake of the harassment, several women elected to withdraw from the world of gaming, demonstrating the true intentions of Gamergate as a movement. At its essence, the question is whether the world of gaming can become more diverse in its inclusion of women, the LGBTQ community, and people of color. The movement stands as a stark example of what happens when women try to enter media spaces, like the gaming world, that have traditionally been controlled by men.

What Kimmel (2008) argued that video games by and large do *not* do for the particular groups of young men he studied is make them more prone to violence or necessarily numb to real-life violence. This argument commonly arises in media discussions of violence in video games and other media formats, and it reflects a belief that observing and participating in the fantasy violence of video games actually leads players to become more violent individuals. There is little research that supports this causal connection between exposure to violent interactive games and real-life violence or crime. At the most, some research has suggested that children become agitated and aggressive after playing video games, and this may apply to the young men playing *Halo* in college dorms.

But this research does not offer any clue as to whether the aggression and agitation experienced immediately after playing video games is sustained over long periods of time. There is no evidence to suggest that the avid video game player maintains a high and prolonged level of agitation and aggression. This research is consistent with the audience power approach to thinking about how people relate to the media. The violence, misogyny, and racism contained in many video games are not simply and uncritically absorbed by the many people who play these games. Rather, their appeal is grounded in the particular historical and social context of these young men's lives. The residents of guyland can choose to use video games as a means of relaxation and escape rather than being hopelessly brainwashed into becoming violent zombies.

## THE GENDER OF LEISURE

Whether you're playing video games or watching Disney movies, leisure itself is gendered. **Leisure** is generally perceived by economists as the opposite of paid work, or what we do with our time when we're not working jobs in the formal economy (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000). You might remember from Chapter 9, on gender and work, that defining exactly what work is can get rather complicated. Many women and men may be working in their homes or other locations even when they're not officially doing paid work, and in the age of smartphones and laptop computers, the line between work and home is becoming increasingly blurred.

Most of us noneconomists generally think of leisure as *free time*, or time completely at our disposal to spend as we choose. In a study of leisure in 10 countries, Michael Bittman and Judy Wajcman (2000) found that men and women living in Denmark and the Netherlands have by far the most leisure time, averaging in excess of 40 hours per week. In the United States, men average only 30 hours of free time per week, but there is still a gap in free time between women and men. For men and women overall, men have 1 hour and 22 minutes more free time than women, while for married men and women employed full time, the gap is 39 minutes. In their analyses, Bittman and Wajcman (2000) found varying levels of inequality in the amount of free time available to women and men across countries (Italy had the greatest gender disparity, with Italian men having 6.5 more hours of free time than Italian women), but these differences were still fairly small overall.

The more important gender differences in free time emerged when the researchers took into account not just the amount of free time available to men and women but also the quality and character of that leisure time. Bittman and Wajcman (2000) were able to explore this characteristic

of leisure because of their use of time diaries as data. With time diaries, respondents are asked to record what kinds of activities they are engaging in at various intervals throughout their day. The analysis of leisure activity includes a broad range of underlying activities that all qualify as leisure. Some of these consist of **pure leisure**, in which the respondent records engaging in only leisure activities at that moment, with no secondary activities taking place. But in today's world, we know that we rarely engage in just one activity at a time. Some respondents combined one leisure activity with another (watching television combined with conversation), while some respondents combined leisure activities with unpaid work activities, such as housework and childcare.

The wife or mother who watches television while she does laundry would be a good example of what the researchers call **contaminated leisure**. When these characteristics of leisure are considered, important gender differences begin to emerge. For men, more than 61% of their leisure is pure leisure, with no other accompanying activity, while little more than half of women's leisure is pure leisure. This means that men spend more than 24 hours on average per week in pure leisure activities compared with women's 21 hours per week, a statistically significant difference. In addition, women experience a larger proportion of contaminated leisure, or leisure time combined with the unpaid work of childcare and other household labor.

Examining other characteristics of leisure also reveals important gender differences. Leisure that occurs in long, uninterrupted blocks of time is qualitatively different from leisure widely distributed in short increments. Bittman and Wajcman (2000) described the latter type of leisure as **harried leisure**, indicating that it must be taken in short segments as opposed to in a more relaxed and comfortable extended block of time. Again, they found that women's leisure was much more likely to be interrupted, indicated by the larger number of actual leisure episodes in women's schedules and the shorter duration of their longest episode of leisure. In other words, women are more likely to squeeze leisure into their busy schedules throughout the day, and their longest, uninterrupted periods of leisure are shorter, on average, than those for men.

One final characteristic of leisure considered by the researchers was leisure spent purely in the company of adults—**adult leisure**—as opposed to leisure spent with children—**family leisure**. Here, as one might imagine, there are significant differences between parents with young children and everyone else, as both fathers and mothers of small children spend more of their time overall in the company of children. But in examining those parents with small children, men still spend more time engaged in adult leisure than do women. Perhaps even more important, Bittman and Wajcman (2000) revealed that the kinds of activities fathers engaged in with their children were very different from the kinds of activities mothers were likely to be doing. More than half of the time mothers spend with their young children is spent doing physical care such as feeding, clothing, bathing, changing, and tending to injuries and ailments. For men, almost a third of the 8 hours per week they spend in childcare is dedicated to playing with their children. Thus, even when men are engaged in unpaid work like childcare, their work is more like fun and less like work than it is for women, who spend a smaller proportion of their time engaged in playing with their young children. Figure 10.8 demonstrates some gender difference in leisure.

This research demonstrates important differences in the quality of leisure time available to women and men—even if the actual amount of leisure time is not significantly different. Moreover, these differences can be traced back to the structure of family life and the doctrine of

**FIGURE 10.8 ■ Gender Gap in Time Use**

## Gender Gap in Time Use

*Hours per week*

| | Men | Women | *Diff* |
|---|---|---|---|
| **All adults ages 18 to 64** | | | |
| *Total work time* | **45.6** | **45.2** | **0.4** |
| Paid work | 33.8 | 23.9 | 9.9 |
| Housework | 9.3 | 15.5 | –6.3 |
| Child care | 2.5 | 5.8 | –3.3 |
| *Leisure* | **33.7** | **29.0** | **4.7** |
| **Adults with children younger than 18 at home** | | | |
| *Total work time* | **54.9** | **53.0** | **2.0** |
| Paid work | 38.4 | 21.6 | 16.8 |
| Housework | 9.5 | 17.7 | –8.2 |
| Child care | 7.0 | 13.6 | –6.5 |
| *Leisure* | **27.7** | **25.0** | **2.7** |
| **Adults without children younger than 18 at home** | | | |
| *Total work time* | **40.8** | **39.9** | **0.9** |
| Paid work | 31.4 | 25.4 | 6.0 |
| Housework | 9.2 | 14.0 | –4.9 |
| Child care* | 0.2 | 0.4 | –0.3 |
| *Leisure* | **36.8** | **31.7** | **5.1** |

*Source:* Pew Research. (2013). Analysis of American Time Use Survey 2003–2011. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/10/another-gender-gap-men-spend-more-time-in-leisure-activities/

separate spheres. Although large numbers of women do paid work, full time, outside the home, the doctrine of separate spheres stating that a woman's place is in the home continues to place an extra burden on their time.

Questions about what stories make it onto our various screens and which don't, what college men like so much about video games, and how gender influences fan fiction may seem like relatively trivial matters compared with the issues of family, work, and bodies that we've discussed in other chapters. But media institutions are an increasingly powerful influence in societies around the world. Media outlets like the Internet, music, television, and films are important ways in which we experience the world. They have the potential to both teach us what is normal and right (media power) and show us what is possible and different (audience power). Gender is built into their structure as organizations, and it, in turn, affects the gender messages of the

media products produced. Gender also affects the way in which we interact with those media products in terms of what we watch and consume and how we watch and consume. As we discovered in the end, gender affects the amount of time we have available to engage in leisure activities, including consuming media products. If the media is the background noise against which we live our lives, its buzz is becoming increasingly louder. It is therefore important that we continue to investigate what these sounds tell us about gender.

## BIG QUESTIONS

- Some social scientists argue that the increasing power of the media is a result of the decreasing importance of face-to-face communities in places like the United States. As people become less connected to their family, friends, and neighbors, what they buy, watch, or listen to becomes increasingly important. Do you agree with this theory about the rising importance of the media? Does this theory have gendered implications? What other explanations might you provide for why media is becoming increasingly important, or do you believe it is?
- The two theories we discussed in this chapter—media power and audience power—have different perspectives on the relative power of the media to influence our attitudes and behaviors. How powerful do you believe the media is? Are we sheep being influenced by the media without knowing it? Or do we have the power to shape and alter the messages the media sends? What evidence would you use in support of either theory?
- Advertising as a media institution helps distort our ideas about gender by playing on stereotypes and focusing on narrow definitions of what it means to be masculine or feminine. Do advertisers have some responsibility to more accurately reflect the reality of the gendered world? How might they do this and still be effective as advertisers? Does the main goal of advertising—to sell you something—inevitably lead to exaggerations of gender stereotypes?
- In Chapter 4, we read about agents of socialization that teach us about how to be gendered members of our society. How is the media an example of an agent of socialization that helps to teach its members how to be men and women, masculine and feminine? What are examples of the shape this socialization would take based on what you've read in this chapter or on your own experiences with the media?
- Does the gender makeup of the formal organizations that produce media content impact the gendered nature of the media content they produce? Can a man make a movie that appeals to women, and can a woman make a movie that appeals to men? Does an emphasis on the gender makeup of advertising firms or television or film studios exaggerate the importance of sex differences, assuming that only women can properly represent femininity and only men can represent masculinity?
- In this chapter, we discussed how Disney movies, specifically *Cinderella*, become a part of children's socialization. What other forms of media are involved in gender socialization? How are the media involved in gender socialization of not just children but adults throughout the course of our lives?

- What would a genderless world of media and popular culture look like? How would movies, television shows, music, magazines, and the Internet be different in such a world? How would the structure of media institutions change in a world without gender? Would this world be better or worse than the currently gendered media?

- How important are the gender inequalities we discussed in relation to leisure? Does it matter that women and men have different kinds of leisure? Is different in this case necessarily unequal? What might be the larger implications of having different kinds of leisure time? How might this contribute to other issues of gender inequality?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. In today's increasingly globalized world, it's relatively easy to gain access to media and popular culture from many other societies and cultures. Use your library, rental services, or the Internet to explore movies, television shows, or magazines from a different society. You might pick one type of media and compare it across two societies—for example, women's magazines in the United States, France, and China. How are the messages being conveyed about gender different across these different societies?

2. The media and popular culture produced in different time periods can tell us a great deal about the behaviors and attitudes of the people of that time period—and, specifically, about their ideas about gender. Pick some media genre—magazines, comic books, popular songs, television shows, or movies—and compare examples across several time periods. For example, you might look at *Superman* comic books from the 1940s to the 1950s, the 1960s to the 1970s, the 1980s to the 1990s, and 2000 and beyond, paying attention to the various messages being sent about gender in these different time periods.

3. Explore the ways in which the gender of the artist or creator of various media genres does or does not impact the ways in which gender is depicted in their creations. You might pick music produced by female and male musicians and then analyze the gender content of their music and lyrics. Do women and men seem to sing about different things, or is their gender unimportant to their music?

4. Research by Michael Kimmel (2008) discussed in this chapter suggested that many college-age men play video games as a means of relaxation, revenge, and restoration. Find some people who play video games and interview them about their experiences with playing video games. You might ask them what kinds of games they like, what they enjoy about playing, and what they think the effects of playing video games might be, as well as what gender messages they believe are contained in the video games they play. How do their responses compare with Kimmel's findings?

5. Do a focus group on the power of media in gender socialization. You could ask about which films, TV shows, YouTube channels, video games, or apps were important parts of the group's gender socialization. Or pick a specific TV show, commercial, or YouTube video and have the group watch together, asking questions afterward. You might include

people of different age groups as well as different gender identities, sexual identities, racial backgrounds, and social classes.

6. Conduct your own research into the amount and type of leisure time available to men and women. Pick some sample of people, trying to include a range of different genders, age groups, and other backgrounds (for example, a married woman with young children compared with a young male high school student). Ask them to keep detailed time diaries, writing down what they're doing in a given day every 30 minutes. Are there differences in the amount of leisure? In the type of leisure (contaminated, harried, pure, adult, or family)? How do your findings line up with those discussed in this chapter?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**A Mighty Girl**

"The world's largest collection of books, toys and movies for smart, confident and courageous girls."

www.amightygirl.com

**The Representation Project**

"Using film as a catalyst for cultural transformation, The Representation Project inspires individuals and communities to challenge and overcome limiting stereotypes so that everyone, regardless of gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, or circumstance, can fulfill their human potential."

http://therepresentationproject.org/film/miss-representation

**See Jane**

"Founded by Academy Award–winning actor and advocate Geena Davis, the Institute is the only research-based organization working within the media and entertainment industry to engage, educate, and influence the need to dramatically improve gender balance, reduce stereotyping and create diverse female characters in entertainment targeting children 11 and under."

http://seejane.org

**Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation**

"GLAAD rewrites the script for LGBTQ acceptance. As a dynamic media force, GLAAD tackles tough issues to shape the narrative and provoke dialogue that leads to cultural change. GLAAD protects all that has been accomplished and creates a world where everyone can live the life they love."

www.glaad.org

## KEY TERMS

Adult leisure
Audience power theory
Contaminated leisure
Culture disablement
Culture industry
False consciousness
Family leisure
Formal organization
Harried leisure
Inspiration porn
Interpretive reproduction
Leisure
Market segmentation
Media power theory
Midriff
Overspill of meanings
Postfeminism
Preferred meaning
Pure leisure
Relaxation
Restoration
Revenge
Reverse discrimination
Shipping
Slash
The super crip
White, working-class male buffoon

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# 11 HOW DOES GENDER HELP DETERMINE WHO HAS POWER AND WHO DOESN'T?

## The Gender of Politics and Power

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

- **11.1** Describe connections between masculinity and power.
- **11.2** Explain some ways men can demonstrate coercive power over women.
- **11.3** Summarize two issues that show the intersection between gender rights and human rights.
- **11.4** Discuss how power can be used to put people into gender categories and determine what rights they will have.
- **11.5** Describe how voting behavior is impacted by a candidate's social identities.

What is power, and how does it work? When you think about all the people in your life who have some power over you, how does that list break down in terms of gender? Is there such a thing as masculine power and feminine power, and how would those two be different? How does the balance of power between people of different genders shift over time?

Where and how do people acquire power, and are there different methods open to women and men? How are issues like sexual assault and sexual harassment manifestations of power relations? How do power and gender permeate the various institutions in our lives, and how does power in one institution translate into power in another institution?

Are certain types of governments more conducive to gender equality than others? What barriers exist to women obtaining power in democratic societies? What would a society in which the balance of power between men and women was more even look like, or what would it look like if the balance were radically shifted in one direction or another? Do you believe, like many feminists, that we live in a world ruled largely by men, and what would life be like if you lived in a world ruled by women?

### POWER: GOOD AND BAD

How can we understand power, outside the vague sense that it's the thing supervillains are after and that superheroes reluctantly accept? **Power** is often defined by sociologists as that ability of some actors to influence the behavior of others, whether through the use of persuasion,

authority, or coercion. In the world of supervillains and superheroes, power is already defined as something ruthlessly craved by the bad guys and perceived largely as an annoying burden by the good guys. This is the popular-culture version of the maxim "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," which is probably drawn from a quotation by Lord Acton in 1887: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men" (Hill, 2000). Hence, the classic superhero struggle not to become the supervillain, leaving us with the deep philosophical question: Is power a bad thing?

To answer that question, it's important to think about all the different kinds of power that exist. The power sought by supervillains is usually coercive power. **Coercive power** is the ability to impose one's will by force, threats, or deceit, and that certainly sounds very Lex Luthor-ish, to invoke just one supervillain. But many people in society who have power are generally not considered to be supervillains. If you think of the hypothetical list of all the people who have some power over you, probably very few of them are supervillains, and many are probably people whom you love and trust. Your parents have power over you, a power that varies in length and intensity depending on the particular family and culture in which you were raised. Your teachers have some power over you, as does the flight attendant when you're on a plane and the official in a soccer game you may be playing. When he or she gives you a red card, which means you're being ejected from the game, you'll probably leave the field (although you may not be happy about it).

Coercive power is probably the kind that first comes to mind when we begin to think about what power is, but for many (though not all) of us, coercive power is probably not the kind of power we encounter most frequently. The power of parents, teachers, flight attendants, and referees is institutional power, or authority. **Authority** is power that comes from a position in an organization or institution that is widely regarded as legitimate. The referee in the soccer game doesn't make you leave the game by threatening you, forcing you, or deceiving you into doing so—unless you play a very interesting version of soccer. But the referee's position in an organization, the particular league to which you belong, provides some degree of authority. It's a limited kind of authority because there aren't a lot of other things you would probably do just because a soccer referee told you to. But it's a kind of power all the same, a power that's necessary to the smooth functioning of our society. If no one listened to sports referees, most games would become fairly chaotic; the same is true of society in general. Authority is also sometimes called **institutionalized power** because it's power that derives from the strength of an institution. Take the person out of the institution, the referee out of the game and out of his or her particular league or organization, and the power's largely gone.

The power that parents have over their children, teachers have over their students, and flight attendants have over their passengers isn't bad power. But just because authority as a form of power comes from institutions doesn't mean it's always power that's being used in a positive way or that there isn't potential for inequality in the use of that power. In this chapter, we first explore coercive power as it relates to gender and then look at the gender consequences of institutionalized forms of power, or authority. But first, it's important to dive head-first into some of the more contentious questions about gender and power more generally.

## Masculinity and Power

You probably noticed in Lord Acton's quote that power corrupts "great *men*," who inevitably become (or already are, depending on your point of view) "bad *men*." Lord Acton was writing about power in 1887, and although the suffrage movement had begun in England more than 20 years earlier with a petition to Parliament requesting the right to vote for women, and although Queen Victoria had been on the throne for 50 years, we can probably assume that Lord Acton literally meant *only* men rather than implying the universal inclusion of *men* as humanity. Even though some of England's most powerful rulers included women like Elizabeth I and Victoria, the assumption in 1887 would have been that matters of real power in the political and economic realm were male matters exclusively. For the Victorians, masculinity was equated with the possession of power. How much has that connection between masculinity and power changed in today's world?

Another way to think about this question is to examine whether having power is an integral part of what it means to be masculine. This brings us back to our questions about the relationship between gender and power and whether gender as a social system is fundamentally a way for distributing power between groups. Does being a man mean having access to power in ways that being a woman does not? In many of the tangible ways in which we would think to measure power, the answer seems to be yes, in a very broad, general sense. As we'll explore in our discussion of institutionalized power, the amount of power available to women fluctuates across time and cultures, but in even the most egalitarian societies about which we have information, men still seem to have more power than women.

We experience this in the way men make and enforce laws, rule governments, start and wage wars, interpret for others the word of God, and accumulate wealth. In some times and places, women have also had some power to do these things, but they have never done so either consistently across time or in as great a number as their male counterparts. Even today on a global scale, men have more control in courtrooms, corporate boardrooms, computer labs, medical centers, and university classrooms (Bonvilliain, 2007). Decisions made by certain kinds of men (usually white, upper or middle class, and heterosexual), whether as CEOs of large corporations, elected officials, or high-ranking religious leaders, still have the power to affect many of the basic aspects of our lives—from where we live to how we work to how we spend our free time.

That's an awful lot of power in the hands of men—supervillain-type power, you might say. But in reality, you probably don't actually know a lot of men who seem like supervillains either in the amount of power they have or in how they use it. And even if there are some men whom you suspect of having supervillain-type power, neither they nor their family and friends probably consider them to be supervillains or even as particularly powerful. Many men profess to feel pretty powerless and not at all like a supervillain. Is this all merely a complicated and devious supervillain ploy? The answer is probably no, and even if it *is* yes, it's really unclear exactly who the supervillain is in this scenario. Still, we're left with the fact that, although across many different societies, men seem to be quite powerful, many individual men feel fairly powerless. How do we explain this?

## Who Really Has the Power? Hegemonic Masculinity

The answer has to do with the way masculinity works both as a social system and as an identity, taking us back to our earlier discussion of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a standard against which all men are judged, even though few if any men actually conform to its ideals. Hegemonic masculinity is largely white, middle class, younger, and heterosexual—pointing already to the ways in which power is not distributed equally to all types of men. Some men—men of color, working-class men, and gay, bisexual, and transgender men—do not have equal access to the power of masculinity because of the other disadvantaged statuses they occupy. Nonetheless, the **hegemonic definition of manhood**, or what it means to be masculine, is "a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power" (Kimmel, 1994).

Michael Kimmel (1994) argued that this power is demonstrated in the endless quest by men to demonstrate this particular definition of manhood. Men must exert power over actual women but also over any feminine characteristics in themselves, because hegemonic masculinity is defined in opposition to anything perceived as feminine. Although the primary audience toward which displays of manhood are directed is other men, men must also avoid at all costs the slightest indication of affection, love, or sexual interest in other men because this, too, calls into question their masculinity; this is because masculinity is inevitably equated with heterosexuality, and so to be homosexual is to make achieving real manhood impossible. Homophobia, then, is not just incidental to the question of manhood; it is essential to it, because the quest to prove oneself masculine is always plagued by the fear of betraying any hint of homosexuality. As Kimmel pointed out, there is probably no worse accusation for many young boys and men in the United States than to be called a "sissy," with the implications it contains about one's sexuality and masculinity.

Because manhood as an identity is structured in this way, Kimmel (1994) argued that most men spend their lives trying to avoid any form of **emasculation** (taking away or reducing masculinity), whether by women or by other men. Women, men of color, working-class men, and gay men are the groups against which men act out their definitions of manhood—the "nonmen" against whom their masculinity is defined. Given that men are engaged in a constant game of defending themselves against emasculation, it's no surprise that violence and the willingness or desire to fight are perceived as key markers of manhood. In his account of a Bronx neighborhood rite of passage for boys, Geoffrey Canada (1995) recounted how the willingness to fight was a necessary component of membership in the street life of Union Avenue. Who won the fights arranged by older boys between younger boys on the block was unimportant; what mattered was that the younger boys proved they were willing to fight, and this rule was enforced on Canada even by his older brother. The willingness and ability to use violence becomes, for many men, an important way in which to prove and defend their manhood.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 11.1

### MOURNING MAYBERRY, MASCULINITY, AND GUNS

The paradox of men, who generally have more power, still feeling powerless may help to explain the attraction of guns and gun culture for some men. Jennifer Carlson (2015) studied men who carried guns and were involved in gun rights advocacy in Michigan. Guns have a

long history of being associated with models of masculinity, from the cowboy to the gangsta of hip-hop culture. Carlson found that the men in her study were drawn to guns because they allowed them to demonstrate masculine protectionism. This is a form of hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes men's ability to protect women and children from other "dangerous" men. Men like Frankie, an African American retired welder, believed that in today's America, a gun was necessary to keep his family safe. He explained, "I don't carry a gun to kill people, I carry a gun to keep from being killed! Pure, plain and simple! Shit, if this was Mayberry, I'd be all right! But it's not" (Carlson, 2015, p. 387). Both working-class and middle-class men in Carlson's study mourned a more idyllic American past represented by television shows like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Leave It to Beaver*. Many of the men in the study were no longer able to fulfill the main provider role in their family, partly due to the economic decline in places like Michigan and across the country. Carlson argued that the men in her study adopted masculine protectionism to compensate for their inability to provide for their families financially. In their economic imaginaries, the United States was living through a period of social and economic decline. Guns were one avenue for these men, who could potentially fall to the bottom of the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity, to maintain their claims on manhood. Carlson's research suggests that for some men, hegemonic masculinity is shifting away from an emphasis on providing to an emphasis on protection. How does this help our understanding of the relationship between gender and power?

This perspective on masculinity as an identity begins to suggest why individual men might not actually feel very powerful, especially if they are engaged in a perpetual battle to prove their manhood. When Canada (1995) was forced to fight by the older boys in his neighborhood, he had little power to refuse. Canada had already witnessed what happened to boys who didn't fight, and they basically received a far worse beating at the hands of the older boys than any of them received in their fights with other younger boys. This partly explains why many men do not feel powerful; they are often being coerced themselves by other men.

But this contradiction is also connected to a sociological dynamic we discussed in Chapter 2: the difference between private troubles and public issues, or between our experiences as individuals and our knowledge of social structure. Remember that one of the revolutionary aspects of the second wave of the women's movement was the way in which feminists began to make connections between their personal lives and larger social structures—between their private troubles and public issues. For women, there is a more easily observed symmetry between their private experiences and public realities.

Feminists have highlighted how women as a group do not have power structurally in society; as individuals, many personally experience this powerlessness in their own lives. For example, as we will explore, sexual assault is a crime experienced disproportionately by women, and the fear of becoming the victim of rape is one many individual women experience, sometimes daily. Structurally, many institutions in our society reinforce this fear through the ways in which law enforcement officers deal with cases of sexual assault; the structure of the courtroom, which makes the rate of convictions for sexual assault so low; and the punishments mandated for the perpetrators of sexual assault. In this instance, there is a clear match between the lack of power experienced individually by women through a fear of sexual assault and the lack of power women as a group have in society to dictate procedures, laws, and punishments for sexual assault.

This relatively straightforward connection between feeling power in our private lives and power in the public sphere is not as true for men. Although evidence suggests that men as a group do have more power at a societal level, many individual men do not feel particularly powerful. One telling metaphor for this feeling of powerlessness comes from the mythopoetic men's movement, a social movement centered around figures like Robert Bly and characterized by an emphasis on reclaiming the "warrior within" men or exploring the inner power of "deep manhood," often through the use of developing and adapting myths and archetypes of masculinity from fairy tales or poetry.

Some men within this movement use the metaphor of a chauffeur to demonstrate power inconsistencies, from their perspective, in the position of modern men. From the outside, the chauffeur seems to be in command; he has on a uniform, he's driving the car, and he knows where the car's going. But we all know that in reality, the chauffeur is taking directions from someone else and is, therefore, not in charge at all. In this metaphor, although feminists from the outside think men have all the power, the reality is that they're really just taking directions from someone else (Kimmel, 1994).

Who exactly is giving the chauffeur his directions in this metaphor? This metaphor, as presented by those in the mythopoetic men's movement, doesn't give us an answer, which exemplifies their emphasis on the individual experiences of men. Individually, men may feel bossed around by their wives, their children, their bosses, and the government, just to provide a small possible list. But Kimmel (1994) pointed out that in reality, the person giving the chauffeur his orders in this metaphor is really most likely to be another man. The powerlessness experienced by men is real in that it is something truly felt by men, but it is the product of relations between other men rather than of any power being transferred away from men as a group in the wider social structure.

Some men have more or less power than other men, and some men have more or less access to the power available to men as a group. For example, a working-class white man will find he has less power than many of the middle-class men he encounters in his life, such as his boss, doctors, landlords, bankers, teachers, and law enforcement officials. But most of the people who possess more power than a working-class white man will still primarily be other men, so that the important power struggles are still primarily among groups of men. To conclude that the solution to the feelings of powerlessness of individual men is to give men more power is to have an imperfect understanding of the way in which power relations are arranged.

In the end, Kimmel (1994) concluded that most men feel powerless because of the way masculinity is constructed as an identity. If the ideals of the hegemonic definition of manhood are so difficult to achieve and so narrowly defined, few men ever actually succeed in feeling completely and securely like a man and, therefore, powerful. So men who are not white, middle class, young, and heterosexual are likely to feel less masculine and therefore less powerful. But if Kimmel is correct in concluding that, at least in the United States, "masculinity has become a relentless test by which we prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves that we have successfully mastered the part" (p. 129), then how many men ever really feel they have passed the manhood test once and for all?

Men may have more power as a whole than do women, but in the end, it doesn't seem like such a great gig—which brings us back to our superheroes and supervillains. In reality, men may be closer to the superheroes, and especially to our modern versions, for whom being a superhero never seems to end up as everything it's cracked up to be. In modern-day superhero stories like Spider-Man, you never get the girl, you might get chased by the cops or perceived as the bad guy, and you have to hide the fact that you are, in fact, a superhero. As in the case of superheroes, the power that men possess comes with a great burden, and this is an important point to consider as we move forward.

## COERCIVE POWER

Coercive power is the ability to influence the behavior of others through the use of force, threats, or deceit. Much of coercive power in gender relations takes the form of violence or the threat of violence. Some feminist analysts argue that coercive power in this form is the building block on which all other forms of gender power are built. Men are more likely to inflict acts of violence on women (as well as on other men), and this essential fact affects all relations between women and men, permeating many institutions throughout our society. In many societies, including the United States, the willingness and ability to be violent is a sure means to gain power, and according to this perspective, men's proven violence is therefore the primary source of their power.

It is verifiably true in the United States that men are responsible for the bulk of violence in the many different forms it takes. Men make up 79% of those arrested for violent crime in the United States (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). Men constitute 97% of those arrested for rape, 77% of those arrested for aggravated assault, 84% of those arrested for robbery, 71% of those arrested for all other assaults, 70% of those arrested for all family violence, and 71% of those arrested for disorderly conduct (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019). Nearly 89% of female murder victims are killed by men (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Men are more likely to commit violent crimes in general, and beginning in the second wave of the feminist movement, a whole host of crimes that were specifically gendered were for the first time identified and perceived as crimes. Feminist analyses point out that, until recently, much of the coercive power exercised by men against women was not perceived as particularly wrong, let alone criminal. As recently as the 1950s in the United States, women who were not virgins could not legally accuse a man of raping them, and rape occurring within a marriage (**marital rape**) became illegal in the United States only as recently as 1976.

Until 1976, rape laws included a marital exclusion because marriage gave husbands the right to have sex with their wives whenever they chose, regardless of their wives' consent. Before the advent of the second wave of the feminist movement in many places around the world, there was no such thing as domestic violence, wife battering, or sexual harassment. Husbands beating their wives was not treated seriously, and certainly not as a crime, until efforts by the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The murder of wives by their abusive husbands was often described by headlines such as "Husband Goes Berserk and Shoots Estranged Wife," ignoring the long-standing patterns of abuse that resulted in these deaths (Del, 1976).

Head and master laws across the United States up until the 1960s and 1970s enforced the almost complete control of a husband over his wife, and so assaults by husbands against wives, as well as parents against children, were not within the purview of the legal system. **Head and master laws** dictated that husbands had final say regarding all household decisions and joint property in a marriage and that a husband could make decisions about these matters without his wife's knowledge or consent. A 1954 report from Scotland Yard demonstrates some of the prevailing attitudes toward family violence, reading as follows: "There are only about 20 murders a year in London and not all are serious—some are just husbands killing their wives" (Coontz, 2005). All these examples demonstrate that because of the fewer rights granted to women historically, many acts of violence against them were not perceived as criminal.

As we discussed in Chapter 9, women have participated in the paid workplace since the beginnings of industrialization. Sexual harassment as an issue first emerged during the 1970s when activists brought it to the attention of the public, businesses, and governments. Before that, behaviors that would now be considered sexual harassment were seen as normal and expected aspects of women's lives in the workplace. Up until the 1950s, some laws in the United States made it perfectly legal for employers to deny employment to women in general, and especially to married women, because of the assumption that married women didn't need jobs to support themselves and were therefore taking jobs away from married, male breadwinners. With this often base-level hostility toward women in the workplace, it's not surprising that treating women as sexual objects and expecting sexual favors from female coworkers was an acceptable aspect of work life in the not-so-distant past.

This real threat of sexual harassment and violence influences the opportunities available to women and the decisions they make. It is now illegal to prevent a woman from taking a job in a male-dominated occupation such as law enforcement, but the sexual harassment that women are likely to face in the police force may drive many women out of this occupation as well as prevent many more from seriously considering the option. Researchers have shown that the perpetrators of domestic violence use the threat of abuse to create a wider pattern of control and coercion. Victims of domestic violence, then, come to exist in a world very much circumscribed by limited opportunities and choices as a result of the constant threat of violence.

Within this situation, the reluctance of some women to leave their abusers, even at the risk of their own lives and those of their children, becomes a particularly strong example of the way in which the looming threat of violence can affect a person's perceived amount of freedom. Some feminists who place violence at the center of their analyses of power and gender argue that every male–female interaction is shaped by a bottom line of potential violence—in a physical fight, the man will win (Kaye/Kantrowitz, 2009). Expressing this perspective, radical feminist Ellen Willis said, "Men don't take us seriously because they're not physically afraid of us" (as quoted in Kaye/Kantrowitz, 2009, p. 484). In this sense, women's status as primarily victims rather than as perpetrators of violence is at the core of gender inequality.

## The Geography of Fear

The possibility of becoming a victim of sexual assault that many women live with has a wide range of possible implications, according to feminist analyses. Some argue that this threat leads

to the creation of a **geography of fear** among women, or the assessments of vulnerability and fear in certain spaces that women are forced to make as a result of the threat of potential violence, assault, or harassment (Valentine, 1989). Despite the fact that most violence against women occurs within the private realm (inside the home) (Dobash & Dobash, 1992; Hollander, 2001), women are taught to avoid the sphere of public space for fear of becoming the victims of violence (Bynum, 1992; Duncan, 1996; Valentine, 1992). A woman in a public setting may feel vulnerable to a wide range of encroachments on her privacy and safety, from objectification through lewd comments to violent crime in the form of physical assault (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). Although women may actually be aware that the private realm is far more dangerous than the public, many constantly question and assess their ability to gauge whether spaces are safe. In this way, the fear of becoming a victim of various types of violence in public spaces enforces the gendered nature of the private–public split, giving women incentive to cede more of the public realm to men. Fear of violence in public spaces literally becomes a means for keeping women "in their place," that place being the home and the private sphere.

## CULTURAL ARTIFACT 11.2

### STOP TELLING WOMEN TO SMILE

As a woman, how often have you had people call out to you on the street, and what do they say when they do? Has a stranger ever told you to smile? As a man, have you ever yelled something at a woman you didn't know? Have you told a woman to smile? If you have, what's so bad about that? Artist Tatyana Fazlalizadeh and the women she interviews for her project, Stop Telling Women to Smile, explore the consequences of just those kinds of actions through art. Fazlalizadeh lives in Brooklyn, New York, and interviews women about their experiences with street harassment. Then she draws their portrait and makes a poster with a slogan inspired by their conversation. She hangs the posters around different neighborhoods in New York. You might have seen some of her images shared on Tumblr or Facebook. The slogans say things like, "Women are not outside for your entertainment," "Men do not own the streets," "I am not here for you," and "You are not entitled to my body" (Fazlalizadeh, 2016). The portraits are striking for the fact that the women in them are not smiling. They draw attention to the ways in which women so often are smiling in artistic depictions. Through her project, Fazlalizadeh wanted to give women an opportunity to talk back to their harassers. Studies suggest that 65% of all women have experienced street harassment; 23% had been sexually touched, while 20% had been followed (Stop Street Harassment, 2016). Among men, 25% had experienced some street harassment, and not surprisingly, the incidence of street harassment among men was higher for LGBTQ individuals. The most common slurs against men were homophobic or transphobic. What do you think about Fazlalizadeh's project to raise awareness about street harassment? What other methods might be effective at stopping this behavior?

In their study of women's use of an outdoor, urban park, Jennifer K. Wesely and Emily Gaarder (2004) examined the strategies and negotiations women use to balance a genuine enjoyment of outdoor recreation against the fears of possible violence and harassment that

might take place in those spaces. Using both surveys and in-depth interviews with women who used South Mountain Park (a pseudonym), Wesely and Gaarder (2004) explored how women enjoy some of the special advantages of outdoor recreation. Women described their workouts in the park with words like "spiritual," "freeing," and "peaceful" (p. 653), which is consistent with an emphasis on the therapeutic value of outdoor recreation. Women also reported enjoying the advantages of getting a physical workout outside the confines of a gym, with its negative social aspects. Women described feeling that gyms, as opposed to the park, were places where people go to find dates and where they feel judged and observed. Getting physical exercise in South Mountain Park allowed them to avoid these downsides of the gym.

These advantages of outdoor recreation were balanced against the real fears many women expressed about being at places like South Mountain Park. In their surveys, about 40% of women had experienced some kind of harassing behaviors while engaged in outdoor recreation in general, while 2.4% had reported being physically assaulted. Although the incidences of harassment and assault were lower for South Mountain Park specifically, women reported that there were many trails and areas where they still felt unsafe. As one woman said, "I feel more unsafe on the less traveled trails—fear of being raped, murdered and left where no one will find me" (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004, p. 654). At the same time, many women also found these isolated trails the most enjoyable because of the opportunities they provided to experience the quiet of nature and avoid the crowds of bikers and other park users.

The fear of certain trails and areas of the park expressed by some women was often grounded in specific experiences described in Wesely and Gaarder's (2004) interviews and surveys. One park user, Mona, jogged alone at night in the park and described an incident in which a young man grabbed her breast and then ran away; after this assault, she was obviously more concerned about where and when she exercised outdoors.

Other women's sense of privacy and control were violated by their being made to feel like objects during their experiences in South Mountain Park. Katie said, "I'll occasionally get a catcall or second glance. I'd like to be able to hike without feeling like someone is looking right through my clothes" (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004, p. 655). Another woman described being generally suspicious of men on trails, hoping they wouldn't turn around and look at her or look not "quite right"; she suspected that few men on the trails had to worry about dangerous women they might encounter in the park in the same way women had to worry about dangerous men.

Through these incidences, women developed their own geography of fear, gradually beginning to associate the public space of South Mountain Park with male violence and violation. For some women, this was a result of direct experiences of being assaulted in the park, but for many others, it was their inability to "choose with whom they interact and communicate" (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004, p. 655) that affected their sense of their own safety.

How did women negotiate these fears of public space in South Mountain Park? The most common strategy was to avoid recreating in the park alone, which meant using the park with other women or men or sometimes bringing a dog. Women also avoided certain isolated trails and tried not to use the park at dusk or at night. Some carried items for safety, most commonly a cell phone—but in at least one case, a woman carried mace with her.

Other women decided to alter their own patterns of behavior in the park. Lisa faced a situation in which the same man showed up at the park every time she was there, talking to her constantly and following her on her hikes. Although she tried going to the park at different times, the same man still showed up, so Lisa eventually stopped going altogether because she didn't want the man to get the "wrong idea" (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004, p. 656). In this sense, the responsibility for preventing Lisa from potentially being attacked is squarely with Lisa, who has to keep this man from getting the wrong idea by not going to the park at all.

This sense of responsibility for their own safety was one of the important dilemmas of the women at South Mountain Park as identified by Wesely and Gaarder (2004). No matter how hypervigilant the women were or what specific measures they took to protect themselves, there was no real way available to them to remove the threat of violence completely while they were recreating in the park. Much of this burden of making themselves safe fell on the women themselves, as opposed to on the men whose behaviors often made them feel unsafe.

But even the possibilities available to these women that shifted the burden of ensuring their safety to others brought a new set of problems. Some women discussed how the park service itself could improve their safety through the use of lighting, emergency phones, or call boxes and the presence of park rangers on the trails. But these solutions present a situation in which women trade limits on their use of space and free range of movement because of the fear of assault, rape, and harassment (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004). Women trade the social control that results from the threat of violence and harassment for a new kind of social control designed to ensure their safety, but both are forms of social control nonetheless. In addition, the presence of lighting, call boxes, and park rangers interferes with many of the exact qualities of being in nature that these women and other users of the park are seeking.

This study demonstrates in one concrete setting how the fear of being assaulted, raped, or harassed has very real effects on basic behaviors for women, like deciding whether they can afford to take the perceived risk of hiking or biking in an urban park. This suggests that there is some truth to the argument that coercive power is an important tool in maintaining gender inequality. The fear of what might happen can effectively work to keep women out of public spaces, and as we discussed in Chapter 9, the public sphere is where the important decisions about the world are made.

In this case, the consequences seem relatively minor. But if we imagine other examples of the public sphere where coercive power might deter women from entering, the implications are more important. Police officers spend much of their time operating in the public sphere, and if some women choose not to enter this occupation because of these kinds of fears, the important job of ensuring public safety and investigating crime lies primarily in the hands of men. The competitive floor of the stock market and commodity exchange markets are also part of the public sphere, and when sexual harassment as a form of coercive power prevents women from entering these occupations, this considerable portion of our economy is controlled largely by men.

The case of women and their use of South Mountain Park also highlighted the ways in which the problem of coercive power used against women is perceived as primarily a woman's problem. Well, of course it's a woman's problem, because women are the ones primarily being

victimized. But this perspective leaves untouched the other side of the equation, that there are people responsible for assaulting, harassing, and raping women.

As Wesely and Gaarder (2004) described, the women took on the burden of ensuring their own safety rather than challenging the entire system that normalizes the harassment of women in public places. Viewing coercive power used against women as a problem for women leaves unexamined the ways in which men and the larger system of gender are also part of this dynamic. If women are solely responsible for ensuring their own safety, then we implicitly assume that nothing can really be done about the tendencies of some men to use coercive power against women. The connection between masculinity and violence is naturalized and assumed to be unchangeable. Besides placing the burden for addressing problems of coercive violence on women, this perspective is also hardly complimentary toward men—especially the large numbers of men who do not harass, assault, or rape women.

## Sexual Assault on Campus

Universities and colleges have increasingly come to understand the ways in which sexual violence forms a type of discrimination against women that works to keep women out of certain spaces or to limit their power in those spaces. As a consequence, college campuses have begun to take more proactive steps to address the problem of rape on campus. In 2007, a study commissioned by the Department of Justice found that 1 in every 5 undergraduate women will experience attempted or completed sexual assault from the time she steps on campus until she graduates. At 20% of the female undergraduate population, sexual assault on campus approached epidemic proportions. Partly in response to that study and citing the statistic, in April 2011, the Department of Education's (DOE) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) issued a "Dear Colleague Letter." A "Dear Colleague Letter" is a guidance document issued by a federal agency, like the Department of Education, that helps explain and interpret existing laws. The 2011 letter extended the reach of Title IX to apply to sexual assault and sexual harassment on campus.

Title IX is a bill passed in 1972 at the tail end of the second wave of the women's movement. The bill states, quite simply, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Those 37 words had a huge effect on gender on college campuses. Initially, Title IX had the most impact on sports. Before Title IX, girls made up only 7% of all high school athletes; today, 2 in 5 high school girls play sports and 42% of all college athletes are women (Winslow, 2016). Women's sports take up 40% of college athletic budgets, on average, a number that's still not equal but is much closer than pre–Title IX figures (Lee & Dusenberry, 2012).

The "Dear Colleague Letter" of 2011 reminded educational institutions that failure to respond to sexual violence could create a hostile environment and therefore constitute a form of discrimination against its victims. Victims of sexual assault form a protected class, and therefore, running afoul of Title IX by not taking concrete steps to end that discrimination could result in the loss of federal funding. The letter then outlined specific steps institutions could take to ensure compliance. These included putting in place procedures for the "prompt and equitable" resolution of sexual assault complaints (Tani, 2017). These new guidelines helped

to redress the ways in which sexual assault on college campuses is reinforced at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels.

Research by Elizabeth Armstrong et al. (2006) is a good example of an approach that examines gender at multiple levels, attempting to explain gender phenomena using all three levels of analysis—the individual, the interactional, and the institutional. In addition, the approach of these researchers examined how processes and characteristics that are not initially gendered can still have gendered implications.

They began with the party scene that dominates many college campuses and the ways in which both female and male college students are motivated to participate in it. The researchers argued that long before they ever arrive on the college campus, many students have already been socialized into certain expectations about college life, which include the party scene as a central element. Going out, drinking, and having fun are considered things you're supposed to do in college and an important way to feel like part of the larger college community life. Many of the women interviewed in the study by Armstrong et al. (2006) had been popular in high school and saw partying in college as the new route to popularity and generally fitting in on the college level. This party motivation had no specifically gendered aspects, but when combined with other factors, it had important gendered implications.

These gendered implications were realized in part because, although the motivation to party in college was gender neutral, the party scene itself was not. In the large Midwestern university setting of this study by Armstrong et al. (2006), partying was the primary way for heterosexual women to meet men. Although the dorm the researchers focused on was itself coed, men coming onto the women's floor had to be escorted, and the floor was locked to any nonresidents. In the large lecture classrooms, women found it difficult to meet or talk to men, and many women complained that they lacked casual, friendly contact with men in the college setting, especially compared with the mixed-gender groups many of them had become accustomed to in high school.

The party scene, then, became the primary venue available to these women for meeting men, as well as for obtaining the status and self-esteem that came with being perceived as desirable to men. The women in this study enjoyed dancing and kissing at parties in part because the attention they received from men required a "skillful deployment of physical and cultural assets" (Armstrong et al., 2006, p. 488). These skills involved wearing the right kind of outfit—"hot" but not "slutty"—as well as working to present the image of the "ideal" college girl with "white, even features, thin but busty, tan, long straight hair, skillfully made-up, and well-dressed in the latest youth styles" (Armstrong et al., 2006, p. 488). The psychological benefits of being admired in the party scene were such that women with boyfriends sometimes mourned their own inability to garner such attention without upsetting their boyfriends by making them jealous.

The motivation to party and the specifically gendered ways in which women experienced partying are important aspects of understanding party rape at the level of individuals. At the institutional and organizational levels, the rules of universities and Greek organizations become important. For example, colleges and universities have some discretion about how strictly and in what settings they enforce state drinking laws. Enforcement of drinking laws is usually especially

rigorous in residence halls, where the researchers (Armstrong et al., 2006) observed resident assistants (RAs) and even police officers patrolling for alcohol violations. The sanctions for these violations were often severe, including a $300 fine, an 8-hour alcohol class, and probation for a year; not surprisingly, students engaged in minimal amounts of alcohol consumption in their dorms. This was in comparison with the free flow of alcohol that took place in the fraternities. Public spaces for social activities that did not involve drinking were also hard to come by in the residence halls, and the nondrinking social options (a midnight trip to Walmart) were perceived as uncool.

Meanwhile, although the Greek system requires the consent of the larger university for some of its activities, the university lacks full authority over what takes place in Greek houses. Greek houses are privately owned and governed in part by the rules of their national organizations as well as by the Interfraternity Council (IFC). Given this situation, according to Armstrong et al. (2006), fraternities at this university had almost complete control over what happened at their parties. When deciding party themes, fraternities often developed parties that required women to wear scant, sexy clothing and put them in subordinate positions. Examples of the parties the researchers observed during their study included "Pimps and Hos," "Victoria's Secret," "Playboy Mansion," and "CEO/Secretary Ho." Some fraternities required that their pledges transport first-year students, and particularly first-year women, to the parties, although transportation home for these women was not provided.

Fraternities controlled who came to their parties, and they showed a pronounced preference for first-year women while often turning away unaffiliated men. In fact, the ability to attract women, and specifically attractive women, to their parties was important to the ability of the fraternities to recruit new members. In these ways, the rules of both the larger university and the structure of the fraternities created an atmosphere that contributed to the incidence of party rape by funneling most of the unsupervised drinking into the Greek houses.

These individual and institutional factors come together to shape the actual interactions that take place during parties at many fraternity houses and create an atmosphere conducive to party rape. Ironically, it is the interactional production of fun that is a key component of this dynamic. In their research, Armstrong et al. (2006) identified the interaction routines that were important to the party scene at this particular university. **Interaction routines** are patterns or norms of speech or action that are followed with regularity to accomplish some task in an interaction, and to imply that they exist for the university party scene is another way of saying that taken-for-granted rules dictate how to have fun at a party. One example of an interaction routine is asking an acquaintance you pass on the street, "How are you?" and understanding that this is not so much a question (you don't actually expect them to explain to you how they are in any detail) as it is a greeting; the proper response according to this interaction routine is a simple answer, like "Fine." The idea that there are rules dictating how to have fun seems like a contradiction until you think about how you might react to someone who tried to tell you intimate details about a recent and traumatic breakup or illness in the middle of a party. A gender-neutral interactional routine for the party scene is that a participant "throw[s] him or herself into the event, drinks, displays an upbeat mood, and evokes revelry in others" (Armstrong et al., 2006, p. 490). The individual who obviously displays unhappiness or creates tension is not participating in the interactional routines appropriate to the party scene.

Other interaction routines of the party scene at universities are gender specific. Armstrong et al. (2006) suggested that women at fraternity parties were expected to wear revealing outfits; to cede control of turf, transportation, and liquor to the male fraternity members; and to be grateful to their male hosts as well as generally "nice" in ways that men were not necessarily expected to be. This overall "niceness" expected from women at parties is another way of describing an expectation of **deference**, or that women accept their status as a group subordinate to men and do not challenge men's control over them. Deference in other settings can take the form of women smiling even when they are actually angry or unhappy to disguise their emotions or choosing to be silent when they are threatened, challenged, or insulted in order not to cause a disturbance. In the context of university fraternity parties in this study, deference meant that women often did not call attention to inappropriate behaviors on the part of men because they did not want to make a scene.

In one example that demonstrates deference, Amanda was drinking at a bar with an older guy named Mike. Although she and Mike made out at the bar, Amanda made it clear that this did not mean she wanted to go home with him. When she found herself stranded at the bar with no ride home, Mike promised that a sober friend of his would take her home. Instead, the sober friend refused to take Amanda home and instead dropped her at Mike's house, asking her in the meantime whether she would be interested in a ménage à trois. Amanda stayed awake all night out of fear and woke Mike up early in the morning to take her home. Despite this ordeal, she described Mike as a "really nice guy" and exchanged telephone numbers with him. Despite being afraid and staying awake all night, in this story, Amanda took no action that would suggest any of Mike's or his friend's behaviors were wrong, deferring her own fears to the need not to be considered a troublemaker.

The party rapes that women reported in the Armstrong et al. (2006) study were generally not accomplished through the use of physical force in the form of knives, guns, or fists. Rather, sexual assault happened through the combination of several forms of low-level coercion. Perhaps most important among those forms of coercion was the pressure to consume large amounts of alcohol. As recounted by one fraternity member, his brothers encouraged women to drink alcohol partly because it was, after all, a party, but they were also aware of the ways in which drinking lowers inhibitions. Women often struggled to remember sexual encounters that occurred when they were intoxicated, suggesting that they were certainly not sober enough to give consent to sexual activity. In addition to alcohol, college men used persuasion and the manipulation of their environment, which was often as simple as locking a door, physically blocking a door, or using body weight to make it difficult for a woman to get up. In these situations, deference combined with fear of further physical violence could prevent women from expressing their own desires in any form, whether that meant saying no, running away, knocking someone down to get out a door, beating on a locked door, fighting back physically, or screaming.

Armstrong et al. (2006) encountered at least one instance of sexual assault in every focus group that included heterosexual women. Most of the women complained about the men's efforts to control their movements within the party scene and the pressure to drink they experienced. Two women in the hall the researchers studied had been sexually assaulted during the first week of school, and later in the semester, another woman was raped by a friend. A fourth

woman suspected she had been drugged at a fraternity party. Given this small sampling of the experiences women had in the party scene, why did they continue to participate in it, as many of them did? The answer is that even with these negative experiences, the party scene can also be fun for university women. Partying allows women to meet new people, experience and display belonging, and enhance their social position (Armstrong et al., 2006).

Many women in the study were invested in the party system, and it was difficult for them to find fault with something they also enjoyed. Many women therefore responded to the reality of women who were victimized in the party scene by blaming the women themselves rather than blaming the context of the party scene that they so valued. The sexual assault prevention campaigns waged on many campuses play into this tendency to blame the victim; many campaigns emphasize the precautions women should take to prevent themselves from being sexually assaulted, and women who then do fall victim can be chastised for not following the prevention strategies laid out for them. Even a group of feminist women on the campus studied by Armstrong et al. (2006) argued that a woman who had been raped "made every single mistake and almost all of them had to do with alcohol" (p. 493). Blaming female victims of sexual assault is also part of the way in which campus women create a sense of status hierarchy between themselves and other women. Even though the party scene emphasizes the importance of women being perceived as "hot," many women convince themselves that they will never be victimized because men perceive them to be worthy of their sexual respect. Women viewed as sexually promiscuous are then considered to be responsible for their own assault because they did not properly earn the sexual respect of men.

Given this reality as outlined by Armstrong and her fellow researchers (2006), what options are available to women for protecting themselves? Some female students chose to opt out of the party scene altogether, but this made them social misfits in a residence hall dominated by the party scene. For the women who chose not to opt out, they continued to face the ongoing danger that full participation in the party scene, including drinking, having fun, and feeling attractive to male college students, carried with it. Women will continue to run a risk in the party scene at universities like the one studied by Armstrong et al. (2006) as long as the problem of sexual assault is perceived solely as either resulting from the decisions of individuals or resulting from different cultural contexts rather than as a combination of factors at many different levels. Narrow approaches include those that continue to treat violence against women as a woman's problem. This study provides another example of how the threat of violence makes women's participation in another public sphere—here, the party scene at college—complicated in ways that men's participation is not.

## Violent Intersections: The Gender of Human Trafficking

In recent years, an old form of coercive power that many people believed had long been banished has reappeared and taken on a particularly gendered form—human trafficking and slavery. The increase in world population coupled with rapid worldwide social and economic changes and corrupt governments has contributed to a booming business in what organizations like the United Nations call *human trafficking* (Bales, 2004; United Nations Population Fund, 2003). **Human trafficking** takes many forms, but at its core, it means using coercive force to sell a

person for exploitative uses. For example, in India, this is accomplished through debt bondage, in which a person pledges her or his labor against a loan of money, leaving unclear how long the person will work to pay off the loan or exactly what kind of work he or she will do. In addition, the labor the person performs in debt bondage does not actually diminish the amount of the original debt. In these situations, the lender does not legally own the person, but complete physical control is exercised over the debtor, qualifying as coercive force used to keep the person and his or her family in slavery indefinitely (Bales, 2004).

Human trafficking is a gendered issue because many of the forces that contributed to the rise of modern slavery had an uneven effect on women and men. The rapid social and economic changes that have taken place since roughly the middle of the 20th century have greatly exacerbated the inequalities between the global North and the global South. Within countries of the global South, women and children often bear more of this increasing burden of inequality, and therefore, they become more vulnerable to human trafficking. This increased vulnerability is, in part, a result of a phenomenon identified as the **feminization of poverty**, or the economic disadvantage experienced by female-headed households relative to male-headed households or couple-headed households.

Research on poverty both within the developed world and in the global South has demonstrated that when women are the main providers for a family, the family is more likely to struggle economically and therefore find itself in poverty. Obviously, the feminization of poverty and the increased economic vulnerability of women are also caused by outright gender discrimination and the lack of educational and professional opportunities available to women around the world.

The increased numbers of women experiencing poverty worldwide makes them more vulnerable to being caught in the web of human trafficking. Although exact estimates of the volume and scale of human trafficking of women are difficult to come by given the clandestine nature of this activity, rough estimates from the U.S. Department of State tell us that between 600,000 and 820,000 men, women, and children are trafficked across international borders each year (Foundation for Survivors of Human Trafficking, 2016). Of those, 70% are women and girls, and 50% are minors. If we included the number of women who are also trafficked domestically within the borders of a particular country, the number would probably climb to 4 million every year.

Women are more likely than men to become victims of modern slavery, and the type of labor performed by women and men also differs. Women who become caught in the global system of enslavement are more likely to end up as domestic servants or to be engaged in various forms of prostitution, and in both situations, they are likely to become victims of sexual violence. The National Human Trafficking Resource Center dealt with 1,654 reported cases of human trafficking in 2016, and 83% of those cases were women. Those numbers represent only the reported cases and so are much lower than the actual number of victims of trafficking in the United States, which some estimate to be as high as 50,000. Globally, according to the International Labour Organization, there were an estimated 20.9 million cases of human trafficking in 2012, making it a $150 billion industry worldwide (Alvarez, 2016).

Accounts of women who have survived and escaped their experiences in the trafficking system reveal the varied backgrounds of those who become victims of this dark side of the global economy. In 2003, a multistate prostitution ring was discovered when a 17-year-old girl in a suburban Detroit strip mall burst into a store and asked the security guard for help (Bales, 2004). The girl had been abducted while she waited at a bus stop in downtown Cleveland, Ohio. Her captors drove her to Detroit, where she was kept in a house with other women and forced to have sex with male visitors. The women were escorted around the house at all times, and younger women were kept in line by older women, who threatened and sometimes beat them.

The girls worked as prostitutes, but they were sometimes also sent to malls in metro Detroit to sell jewelry and trinkets, while others were forced to dance and strip for private parties. The captors, including Henry Davis, who the police discovered had been kidnapping girls for his prostitution rings in the midwestern United States since 1995, controlled the girls through a system of rewards and punishments. If the girls obeyed orders, they were rewarded by being taken out to get their nails and hair done, and this was how the girl came to escape and bring the ring to the attention of law enforcement. If they disobeyed, they were beaten, with older women often acting as enforcers.

In a very different case, Hilda Dos Santos had worked as a domestic servant for her employers, the Bonettis, in Brazil for many years before they asked her to move to the United States with them in 1979. Once in the United States, the Bonettis stopped paying Hilda and made her into a slave in their suburban Washington, DC, home (Bales, 2004). For 20 years, Hilda cleaned the house, did the yardwork, cooked the meals, cared for the pets, and shoveled snow without gloves, boots, or a coat. She slept on a mattress in the basement and was not allowed to use showers or bathtubs in the house. She was fed leftovers and scraps for food, and she was beaten when she made mistakes. When a cut on Hilda's leg became infected, the Bonettis refused to provide any medical care. Hilda escaped only when a stomach tumor grew to the size of a soccer ball and a neighbor took her to the hospital because the Bonettis refused to do so. It was only then that social workers were alerted and the law intervened to save Hilda.

Shanti Devi was 39 years old when she left her village in Bangladesh to look for work in town in order to support her ailing husband and three children, exemplifying the feminization of poverty as a female-headed household. A man named Monkhar, from a neighboring village, convinced Shanti Devi that her long-lost brother had sent for her with a job offer in India. When she went with Monkhar, he took her to a slum in Delhi, India, and sold her to a pimp for $60 (2,000 rupees). When Shanti Devi realized what was happening to her, she was fortunately able to escape and take shelter in a Bangladeshi slum, where an Indian nongovernmental organization (NGO) was able to help her return to Bangladesh (Paul & Hasnath, 2000). Shanti Devi's case demonstrates a stark and frightening difference between historical slavery and new slavery: the affordability of slaves. In 1850, an average field laborer in the United States cost $1,000 to $1,200. Adjusted for today's values, that would be about $40,000. But Shanti Devi was sold for only $60, and in some parts of the world, slaves can be bought for as little as $10.

Although some women, like the teenage girl in the United States, are abducted and forced into slavery, many others, like Shanti Devi and Hilda Dos Santos, are coerced into the clutches of human trafficking by the desperation of their economic circumstances. The problem of

human trafficking, then, is one that reflects wider problems of gender inequality and inequality between the developing and the developed worlds. Through the booming business of sex tourism, those with the wealth to do so can increasingly travel to parts of the global South to participate in the system of modern slavery.

But regardless of the particular route, the human trafficking system is driven by the desires of those with wealth, whether that be to satisfy themselves sexually or to have someone clean their house for them. The issue of human trafficking is therefore a problem of both the very wealthy and the very poor. It is an issue that has received increasing amounts of attention in recent years, including an antitrafficking law passed by the U.S. Congress in 2000 and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur (Reporter) on human trafficking by the United Nations in 2004 (Bales, 2004). But the trafficking of women is also a new manifestation of a very old problem—the systematic use of coercive power against women. It is a new manifestation of the existing system of gender inequalities in global context.

## GENDER RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS?

Human trafficking as a moral issue seems fairly cut and dry; it's difficult to imagine someone articulating a moral defense of some of the cases we've discussed. Forcing women to work in brothels or prostitution rings and to marry against their will are clear-cut violations of basic human rights. But there are cultural and ideological variations in the extent to which certain behaviors are perceived as morally wrong. Prostitution itself is but one example. The women we discussed had no choice about being forced into lives of prostitution, but for some women, the extent to which the decision to become a sex worker is a choice becomes less clear.

On one side of this debate lies the argument that all prostitution is a form of slavery and that prostitution in all its forms should be eliminated (Barry, 1995). But the other side argues that it's only forced or nonconsensual prostitution that should be made illegal and therefore perceived as immoral. From this perspective, it is not prostitution itself that demeans women but the outcast status that sex workers are given by cultural norms. Setting aside this outcast status, prostitution could, in some circumstances, serve as a means for women to gain economic independence from men (Davidson, 2002; Kilvington et al., 2001; Songue, 1996). Only by removing that outcast status can the human rights of sex workers be fully protected.

This particular argument hinges on deciding exactly what we mean by *choice*. Those who argue that prostitution is wrong in every form it takes argue that the decision on the part of women to sell sex is never really a choice; women are *forced* to become prostitutes through violence but also because of economic pressures. The woman who becomes a prostitute to support her family financially, send her children to college, or buy a house is not really making a choice; she is being forced into prostitution by the lack of other economic avenues open to her as a woman. In a world in which economic opportunities are provided equally to men and women, no woman would choose to sell her body, and prostitution would therefore not exist.

These debates become especially important when they help dictate the approach governments and other organizations take to dealing with prostitution. Most of the prosecution of prostitution targets the women who provide sex rather than the men who take advantage of

their services. This supports the argument that it is the outcast status of prostitution that makes the institution morally wrong; were sex work legal, the women themselves would not have to pay the price by being arrested.

Different countries have developed varied ways of dealing with prostitution based on these opposing views. In Sweden, the purchase of sex is illegal, but the sale of sex is not (Bales, 2004), based on the assumption that the women providing sex are the vulnerable population who need to be protected rather than the men exploiting their vulnerability. Germany and Holland, on the other hand, have legalized prostitution and instituted programs to inspect brothels, ensuring healthy and safe working conditions for prostitutes.

## Hijab and Ethnocentrism

Prostitution is just one example of a larger debate about what exactly we mean by human rights and how we should go about defining what those are. Should women have the right to sell sex for a living, or should they have the right never even to face the possibility of selling sex for a living? The idea of human rights exists as a direct counter to the kind of coercive power we've been discussing thus far in this chapter. Many of the basic human rights established by governments and the United Nations focus on the right to be free from coercive forms of power. But conversations about human rights can lead us down the hazardous path of ethnocentrism and into a tangle of decisions about who gets to decide what is right and wrong.

Ethnocentrism, as we discussed in Chapter 5, is the tendency to use the lens of your own culture to judge someone else's culture. When people in the United States began to turn their attention to Afghanistan and the Taliban in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many were shocked by the sight of Afghan women wearing **burkas**, tentlike garments that cover the woman's entire body, leaving a tiny transparent bit of cloth for her to see out of and negotiate the world. Many Western human rights activists insisted that women wearing burkas in public was strange, cruel, and wrong. When the United States invaded Afghanistan, freeing many women from their burkas, it was considered a sign of clear moral victory. We liberated these women from this form of gender oppression.

But this position can be perceived as a good example of an ethnocentric view, and it is a manifestation of a larger struggle over the issue of hijab in general. The practice of **hijab** originates from the Prophet Muhammad's directions toward Muslim women to "lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is appropriate, and to draw their veils over their bosoms" (Brooks, 1995, p. 21). Different Islamic cultures have interpreted this line from the Koran in different ways. Some assume this merely means that women should dress within the contemporary limits of modesty. Many Algerian women in France interpret this to mean that women must keep their head covered in public, and they therefore wear headscarves. In Saudi Arabia, women wear black cloaks that completely cover their bodies, while in Palestine and Egypt, some women wear floor-length coats with white headscarves. Other Palestinians and Egyptians wear calf-length skirts and headscarves. Muslim women in the United States sometimes wear headscarves, but they also often wear Western clothing that they consider appropriately modest. It's safe to say that the ways in which hijab is interpreted and enforced in the Islamic world vary a great deal.

From the perspective of many outside the Islamic world, forcing women to cover themselves completely, whether in the blue burkas of Afghanistan or the black hijab of Saudi Arabia, is a clear form of oppression. Yet many women in Islamic countries defend these practices and argue that depriving them of the ability to cover themselves is, in fact, the clear example of oppression. Their reasons for defending the practice of hijab vary, from a defense of their deeply held beliefs about gender differences to perceiving hijab to be a means of critiquing the colonialist domination of the Middle East by the West (Read & Bartokowski, 2005). From this latter perspective, hijab is a way to challenge the imperialism of Western women's dress and the ways in which Western fashion turns women's beauty into "a product of capitalism to be bought and sold" (Brooks, 1995, p. 25). Examined in this way, women in places like Iran who wear hijab are akin to militant feminists in Anglo-European society like Andrea Dworkin, who wore denim overalls to protest the exact same tendencies of Western capitalism. On a personal level, many women in the Islamic world appreciate the way hijab frees them from the exact kinds of harassment and threats of violence experienced by women in South Mountain Park in the United States.

The dangers of ethnocentrism become clear when we look at the case of hijab. When we judge Islamic cultures by Western standards, being forced to cover your entire body looks weird and definitely wrong. But many women in the Islamic world reflect their own ethnocentric perspective, in which what is weird and definitely wrong is the way in which Anglo-European women are objectified and made into moving targets in public space. Which perspective is the "right" one?

Ethnocentrism is not necessarily an intentionally malicious way of thinking, although it is often used as such; rather, an ethnocentric viewpoint is the natural product of successful socialization. When you learn how to be a member of your own culture, it's something of a given that you'll feel that the way things are done in your own society is the way things should be done. This doesn't mean that we can't be aware of our ethnocentric tendencies and begin to move in another direction. **Cultural relativism** is a perspective that encourages us to view other cultures through their own lens rather than through ours. Rather than asking just what *we* think about the practice of hijab, we should also be sure to examine what the people within that culture think about the practice. This doesn't necessarily give us a way to say who's right and who's wrong, but it certainly gives us a better and more complete wealth of information from which to draw conclusions.

## THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of examples of practices related to gender in your own culture that might seem oppressive from an outside perspective? How would you go about explaining or defending these practices to someone from outside your own culture? Or would you defend these practices?*

The dilemma of ethnocentrism is one that's especially important to a discussion of gender equality and power. Feminism and other discourses about women's rights are largely products of the Western world and Western modes of thinking, and they are therefore prone to imposing their own views on what gender equality means. In Chapter 2, we discussed the ways in which

feminism itself is sometimes perceived as a version of Western imperialism being imposed on people of the global South. The power dynamic between the developing and the developed worlds involves coercive power at times, as when countries like the United States invade other countries to bring about democratic change. At other times, the United States and international organizations speak from a position of authority granted them by the global economic system, using a form of institutionalized power. Many people argue that the prosperity and democratic institutions of countries in the Western world give them a kind of moral authority to dictate what should happen in the developing world. But power that comes from authority is still a kind of power, and it can still be resented by the people whose behaviors are the targets of change.

## INSTITUTIONAL POWER: DEFINING GENDER

Power can be used to judge the gendered practices of different cultures as well as to distribute more power to women over men. Power is also involved in determining what gender is and how people will be put into different gender categories, as well as what rights will be available to transgender and nonbinary people. In 2016, North Carolina passed a bill that required transgender people in government and public buildings to use the bathroom that corresponds with the gender on their birth certificate. The bill also made it illegal for cities and towns to adopt their own antidiscrimination policies to protect their LGBTQ residents (Levin, 2019). The law drew widespread outrage as well as economic consequences for the state. Companies like PayPal cancelled planned expansions in response to the bill, and the NBA and NCAA both moved events out of the state. In the face of potential losses of billions of dollars, North Carolina repealed the bill in 2017.

At the national level, President Donald Trump's administration took repeated steps to limit the rights of those within the LGBTQ community. On the day of President Trump's inauguration, the administration scrubbed all mentions of LGBTQ people from the websites of the White House, Department of State, and Department of Labor. In February 2017, the Departments of Justice and Education withdrew guidance from a 2016 "Dear Colleague Letter" explaining how schools had an obligation to protect transgender students from discrimination under Title IX. The administration's delegation to the United Nations annual Commission on the Status of Women conference included two individuals from outspoken anti-LGBTQ organizations, including one designated as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Most famously, the administration created a new policy banning any transgender people from joining the military, and those already serving were prohibited from "appearing or acting transgender" (Holden, 2019). When President Joe Biden took office in 2021, one of his first acts was to undo the ban on transgender people serving in the military, as well as undoing many of the other anti-LGBTQ+ policies of the Trump administration. Across all agencies and bureaus, from removing housing policies that would address the unique needs of LGBTQ homeless populations to cancelling plans to prohibit hospitals from discrimination against LGBTQ patients as part of Medicare and Medicaid funds, the Trump administration waged an all-out war against the rights of LGBTQ communities (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2019).

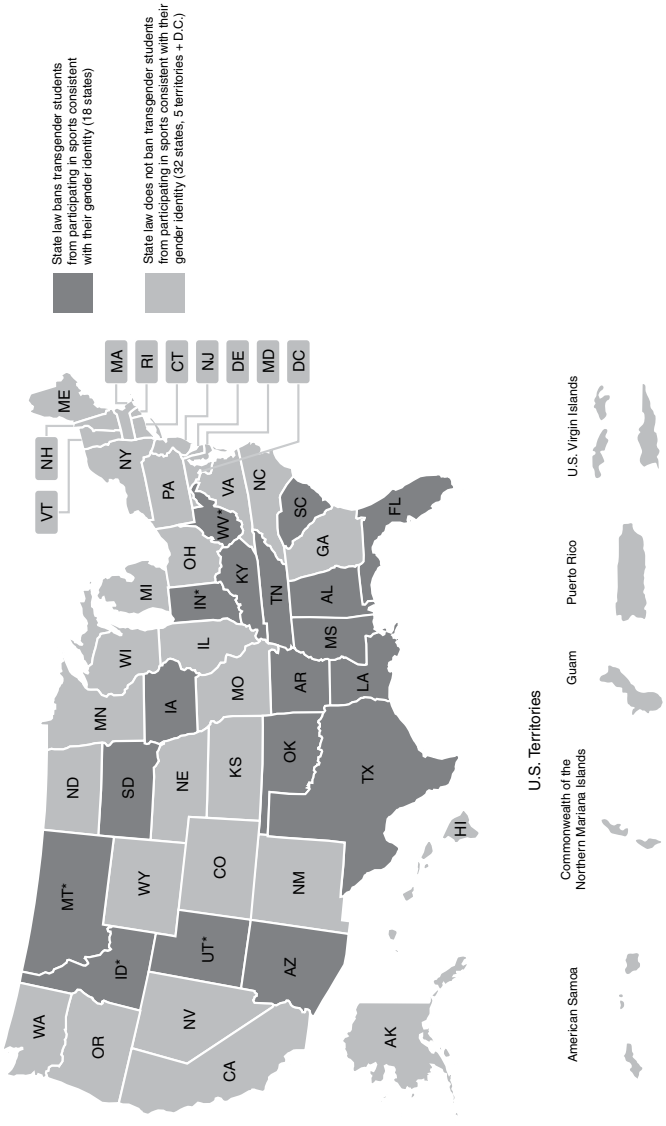
These attacks on the rights of queer people—and especially transgender youth—have not ended with the end of the Trump presidency but, in many ways, have accelerated on a state-by-state level. In 2021 alone, 22 states legislatures introduced bills to ban what several professional medical associations have identified as the best-practice medical care for transgender young people (Movement Advancement Project, 2021). Arkansas became the first state to enact such a bill into law, followed by an order from Texas governor Greg Abbott restricting access to gender-affirming medical care for trans youth in February of 2022 (Conron et al., 2022). Governor Abbott went one step further by directing state health agencies to investigate parents or guardians for child abuse if they provide gender-affirming care for their transgender children (Cassino, 2022). A bill in Missouri would take similar action. This means that in 2022, 58,200 transgender youth were at risk of losing access to care because of state policies and bans (Conron et al., 2022).

In a similar vein, 18 states have passed laws that ban transgender girls and women (and, in some cases, intersex girls and women) from participating in sports as their affirmed gender. These numbers suggest the existence of a pressing problem in the form of vast numbers of trans or intersex girls on sports teams across the country, but this is not at all the case. In reality, only 2% of high school students identify as transgender. If half of those students are transgender men, that leaves 1% of the high school population as potentially trans girls or women (ACLU, 2022). Not all of those trans girls or women will be interested in participating in sports. Figures 11.1 and 11.2 highlight the current state of transgender bans on sports participation and access to affirming health care as of this writing.

Given that the question of trans and intersex girls in sports affects such a small number of people, why is the status of transgender young people such a focus for Republican elected officials? Some research suggests that bringing attention and focus to questions of sex, gender, and identity can serve as a tool to push men to be more likely to identify as Republican. One study conducted by Dan Cassino and Yasemin Besen-Cassino examined the relationship between answering a question that suggests a nonbinary construction of gender and political orientation (2021). Instead of including a simple binary question about gender—Are you male or female?—the authors asked respondents to place themselves on a continuum between masculine or feminine. Because these questions are out of the ordinary, they also included an explanation on the survey reading "that gender is different from sex, that the traits a society thinks of as masculine or feminine can change over time, and that most people have a mixture of masculine and feminine traits" (Cassino, 2022).

In three survey experiments conducted between 2016 and 2019 of 3,300 respondents, the researchers found that asking this question—which suggested that gender is not either/or and that gender can change over time—affected how people responded to later questions. In one version of the survey, asking about gender in this way increased the probability that men would identify as strong Republicans from about 9% to 18%. In a similar vein, first asking first about political party made Republican men 16 percentage points more likely to put themselves at the extreme masculine end of the gender scale, which can be interpreted as a rejection of a nonbinary view of gender (Cassino, 2022).

**FIGURE 11.1 ■ Equality Maps: Bans on Transgender Youth Participation in Sports**

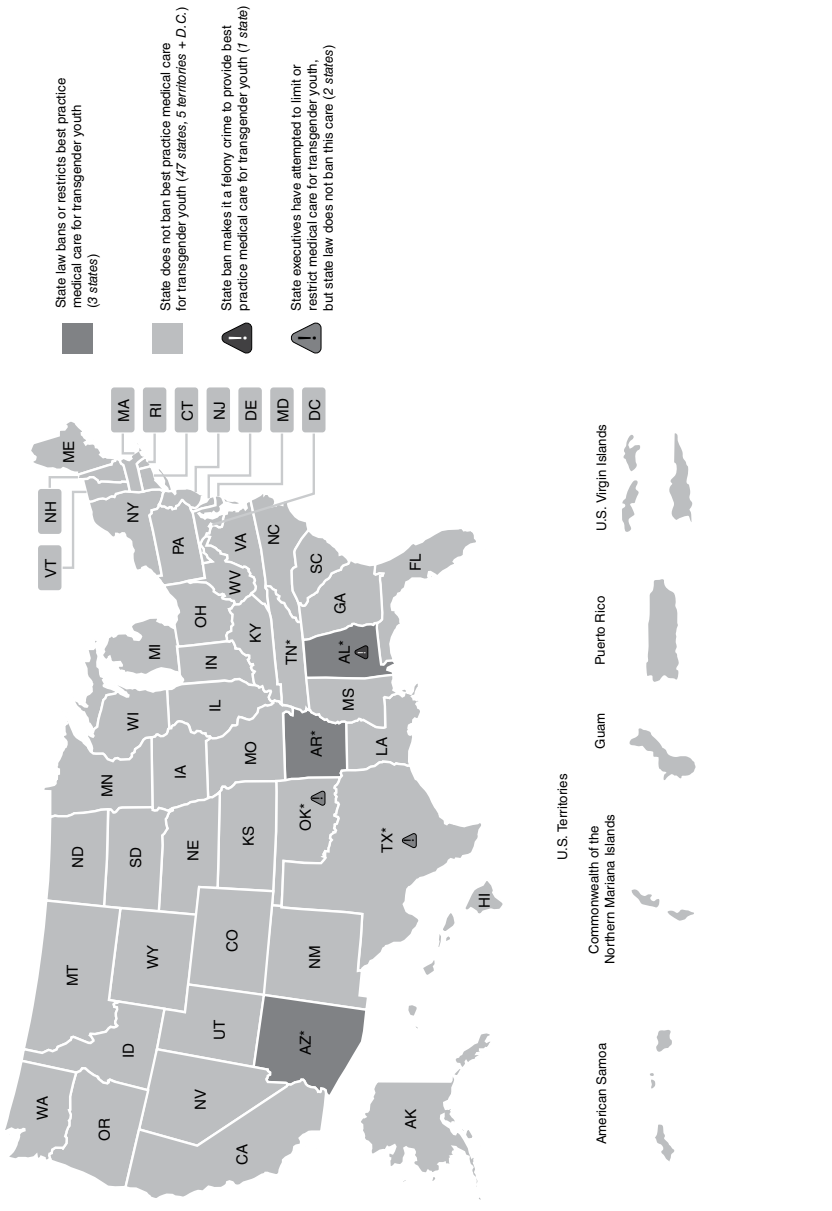



*Source:* Movement Advancement Project. (2022). Equality maps: *Bans on transgender youth participation in sports*. https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/sports_participation_bans. Accessed 12/22/2022.

*Notes:* Currently, temporary injunctions are blocking enforcement of the bans in Idaho (*Hecox v. Little*, Aug 2020), West Virginia (*B.P.J. v. West Virginia*, July 2021), Indiana (*A.M. v. Indianapolis Public Schools*, July 2022), and Utah (*Roe v. Utah HSAA*, Aug 2022), but the cases are still active in the court system pending further judicial review. This map will be updated as those cases progress. Additionally, a court order in Montana (*Barrett v. Montana*, Sept 2022) has permanently blocked the state's ban as it applies to higher education but not K–12. Click "Citations & More Information" beneath the map legend for more information on each state.

While in 2020, Idaho became the first state to legislate whether transgender student-athletes can play sports, many state high school athletic associations have developed their own policies, which also vary widely from state to state. For more on these associations' policies, see Trans Athletes tracking.

**FIGURE 11.2 ■ Equality Maps: Healthcare Laws and Policies**




*Source:* Movement Advancement Project. (n.d.). *Equality maps: Healthcare laws and policies*. https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/healthcare_laws_and_policies

*Notes:*

- Alabama: In May 2022, a federal judge temporarily blocked the part of the state's law that bans medication for transgender youth, though the rest of the law remains in effect for now, including the felony punishment and provisions that require school staff to tell parents if a child expresses thoughts that they might be transgender.

(*Continued*)

- Arizona: The state's law (SB1138, 2022) did not go into effect until March 2023. The law bans gender-affirming surgical care for minors, though it does not ban other forms of best-practice medical care such as hormone-related medication.
- Arkansas: In July 2021, a federal judge temporarily blocked Arkansas's law from going into effect. This map will be updated as that case progresses.
- Tennessee: The state's law (SB126, 2021) prohibits medical providers from providing hormone-related medication to "prepubertal minors." Best practice medical care for transgender youth only includes such medication once a youth has entered puberty, not prior to it, and this further illustrates how these legislative efforts reflect a fundamental lack of understanding of medical care for transgender youth. However, this legislation sets a dangerous precedent for further restrictions on medical care for transgender youth.
- Texas: As reported by Equality Texas, "On February 18th [2022], in the middle of early voting for the Texas primary elections, Attorney General Ken Paxton released a non-binding opinion grossly mischaracterizing medically necessary, best-practice healthcare for transgender children as child abuse. Shortly after, Governor Abbott sent a letter to the Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS) directing them to enforce Paxton's opinion." These actions do not change the law in Texas and are not legally binding (in fact, their very legality is being directly challenged in court), but they have nonetheless caused harm and even initiated investigations into families of transgender children in the state. These investigations were temporarily halted by a statewide injunction until a Texas Supreme Court ruling in May 2022 ended that injunction. However, the Texas Supreme Court also ruled that the governor had no authority to order such investigations. This map will be updated as this case progresses. For more information and resources, see the Transgender Education Network of Texas (TENT) and Equality Texas.

This research suggests that a binary conception of gender is deeply tied to men's understanding of what it means to be Republican. Even considering the possibility that gender might not be binary or that gender might change over time seems incompatible with being Republican for men. It's no wonder, then, that the "plan to rescue America" released by the National Republican Senatorial Committee in 2022 included the statement that there are only two genders. This assertion was given equal weight along with other items such as tougher criminal sentencing rules, building a border wall, and making the income tax less progressive. All of this research suggests that attacking transgender people makes for good politics for Republicans, as harmful as it is to actual transgender young people.

Researchers Laurel Westbrook and Kirsten Schilt (2014) might identify these efforts by the Republican Party to defend the gender binary and define away transgender people as an example of determining gender. In their research, Westbrook and Schilt look at three case studies in which conflict emerges over who does and doesn't count as a woman: public debates over the expansion of transgender employment rights; policies determining the eligibility of transgender people for participation in competitive sports; and proposals to remove the genital surgery requirement for a change-of-sex marker on birth certificates. They find that in some settings and situations, society has progressed from biology-based ideologies for determining gender to identity-based ideologies. **Biology-based ideologies** assume a natural, male–female binary that can be objectively measured at the level of chromosomes, genitalia, or hormones. **Identity-based ideologies** assume that gender identity, or a person's individual sense of his or her own gender irrespective of biology, is the best basis for determining gender. In "nonsexual," gender-integrated settings like the workplace, identity-based ideologies are often used. So in many workplaces, policies for transgender employees privilege their gender identity over their biology. But in gender-segregated spaces, identity-based ideologies and biology-based ideologies often come into conflict, resulting in what Westbrook and Schilt (2014) call gender panics. **Gender panics** are situations in which people react to disruptions to biology-based ideologies by

frantically asserting the naturalness of the male–female binary. This labor of furiously reasserting the binary is **gender naturalization work** and attempts to quell the gender panic.

Conservatives' attempts to impose a biological definition of gender are a good example of gender naturalization work. As in many of the situations studied by Westbrook and Schilt (2014), the biology-based ideology focuses on genitalia rather than other biological criteria such as chromosomes or hormones. This is interesting given that chromosomes alone are unchangeable, while both genitalia and hormones can be altered. Even though the chromosomes of all individuals do not line up with a simple XX (female) and XY (male), it is impossible to change one's chromosomes. The focus instead on genitalia might suggest the increasing credibility of identity-based ideologies. That is, perhaps policy makers focus on genitalia precisely because it can be changed, though this seems unlikely in the case of the Trump administration's attempts to define gender as determined by the genitals a person is born with.

Other reasons genitals might be the focus of biology-based ideology is that both reinforce the idea of gender oppositeness and reveal the deep connections between gender and sexuality. The oppositeness of genitalia can be seen in the ways that conversations focus not on penises or vaginas but on penises or no penises. That is, a man is someone with a penis while a woman is the opposite, a person without a penis. In fact, Westbrook and Schilt (2014) point out that gender panics are often mostly penis panics, in that the concern is often about allowing people with penises, who are presumed to be dangerous, around people without penises, who are presumed to be victims. The danger of allowing transgender people to use bathrooms that match their gender identity, according to this argument, is that it might permit people with penises to use women's restrooms (an argument that ignores the fact that nothing currently prevents people with penises from entering women's restrooms). These assumptions reveal the close connection between gender and sexuality—people with penises desire to have sex with people without penises.

This examination of the logic of determining gender reveals the ways in which cissexism, sexism, and heteronormativity all intertwine. In fact, concepts like heteropatriarchy and cisheteropatriarchy help encapsulate these intersections. Heteropatriarchy refers to the ways in which gender, sexuality, and other systems of inequality interconnect and are reinforced by the gender binary with heterosexuality as the norm. In other words, it's impossible to untangle the way in which our ideas about sexuality reinforce our ideas about gender and vice versa. Cisheteropatriarchy adds to the equation the ways in which our assumptions that one's gender identity lines up with the gender assigned at birth are also part of this dynamic.

Westbrook and Schilt (2014) argue that their findings on these processes of policy-making call for an extension of what doing gender means. As we've discussed, doing-gender theory draws attention to the process of gender attribution or sex categorization that happens in everyday interaction. Every time we interact with a person, we put him or her into a gender category. But gender attributions aren't just made in interactions. Policy decisions also involve making decisions about people's gender; Westbrook and Schilt (2014) label this larger process determining gender. Determining gender happens at three levels. The first is in everyday interaction, the gender attribution described in doing-gender theory. The second is in legal cases and policy decisions, as in the Trump administration's attempt to use biology-based criteria to define

gender. The third level is the imaginary, when the media and other institutions create discourses about the imagined bodies of people and use those criteria to sort them into gender categories.

Attempts to define gender based on biology-based criteria are harmful in that they negate the lives and experiences of transgender, nonbinary, and intersex people. These policies are also harmful to cisgender women and men. At the end of 2019, the Supreme Court heard a case arguing that employers have the right to force employees to dress in ways consistent with gender stereotypes. The case focuses on the firing of Aimee Stephens, a transgender woman. The Trump administration argued that under Title VII, employers can force women to dress in ways that align with stereotypical understandings of gender as long as they do the same for men. That is, an employer can force women to wear skirts as long as they also force men to wear suits. Should the Supreme Court uphold this rule, ciswomen as well as trans women could be forced to wear skirts or other uniforms by their employers. This case demonstrates that attempts to make it easier to discriminate against transgender and nonbinary people hurts everyone.

## Men and Women in Office

Much of the U.S. history taught in high schools and colleges is the history of American politics, what historians call *political history*. Political history focuses on who was elected to office, the decisions they made, the wars they fought, the peace they made, and the general happenings in the world of what political scientists sometimes call the political elite. The **political elite** are "the small group of people who hold high-level positions of power and responsibility in a government" (Conway et al., 2005, p. 117). For most of the history of the United States, the political elite were all male, and so much of the history we learn is also about men. For these reasons, when high school students in the United States are asked to name 10 famous American women, most can do so only by adding "Mrs." to the last names of all the presidents they know (i.e., "Mrs. Jefferson, Mrs. Washington, Mrs. Adams"); on average, students can generate 11 male names but only 3 female names (without using the "Mrs." strategy; Sadker & Sadker, 2009). A history of the United States that focuses solely on the political elite is, therefore, a history of men—which is still not to say gender isn't an important part of that history. Nonetheless, the gender implications of political history as a history of masculinity go largely unexplored.

When the definition of political activity is expanded beyond membership in the small group of political elite, there is more evidence of women's important contributions to the history of the United States. In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to women's roles in social movements and civic organizations, groups that can also be important political actors. In this arena, women were much more active than in the capacity of elected officials.

For example, 40,000 women joined to form the Women's Peace Party from 1914 to 1915, while thousands of women were involved in the suffrage movement (the movement for women's right to vote), settlement house movement (a movement focused on urban poverty), and temperance movement (movement to make alcohol illegal) of the 19th century (Githens, 2003). In the 20th century, women worked in the public arena to secure reproductive freedom and equal rights, as well as being active in peace movements and movements for the expansion of social welfare programs. Other women became involved with the International Workers of the World (IWW),

or the Wobblies, organizing for workers' rights. In other parts of the world, women were involved with the overthrow of the aristocracy in France, the bread riots that helped spark the Czarist revolution in Russia, and the Algerian war for independence (Githens, 2003).

These examples demonstrate that women have had an important part to play in politics historically. But social movements are social organizations that often work outside the established world of official politics, especially so in their early stages. Social movements happen when actors and groups in a society find that their interests are not served by the workings of established politics. The African American civil rights movement in the United States beginning in the 1950s came about because the government, at both the federal and local levels, was not taking action to ensure the rights of Black citizens.

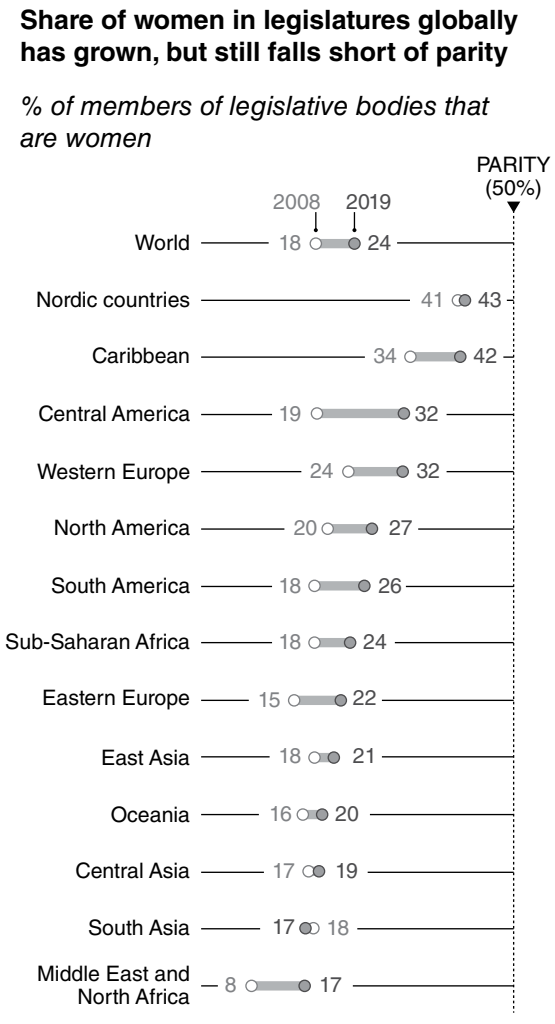
As Martin Luther King Jr. articulated, drawing on the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi, when a government becomes unresponsive to the needs of its population, civil disobedience is a valid means of working toward social movement goals. In other words, when the laws of the land are unjust, the only strategy available to a group may be to disobey those laws. Thus, women's involvement in social movements rather than in existing political structures is evidence of the fact that women's access to these structures has historically been restricted, a situation only slowly beginning to change around the world.

As of 2022, there were 28 countries where 30 women serve as heads of state and/or government. These numbers exclude figurehead monarchs, and some women are heads of both government and state. At this current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years (United Nations, 2022). Only 21% of governmental ministers were women, and only 14 countries have achieved 50% or more women in their cabinets. The five most common cabinet positions held by women reflect gender assumptions. These positions were family/children/youth/elderly/disabled; followed by social affairs; environment/natural resources/energy; employment/labour/vocational training, and women's affairs/gender equality.

At a slightly lower level of government, women hold about 26% of all parliamentary seats worldwide. The three countries that have achieved 50% or greater percentage of women in their parliaments are Rwanda (61.3%), Cuba (53.2%), and Bolivia (53.1%). Mexico (48.2%), Sweden (47.3%), Grenada (46.7%), and Namibia (46.2%) come next (InterParliamentary Union, 2019). Though Nordic countries (like Sweden) do best at 43% women in their parliaments, the largest recent increases since 2008 are in Central America, with an increase of 13 percentage points (Atske et al., 2019). In the United States as of 2022, 27.5% of the seats in Congress were occupied by women. In Figure 11.3, the differing progress in gender equality in governments is described.

Women have made significant gains in their representation among the political elite, although this progress has been unsteady, as we will discuss. Looking at women and men in political office raises two interesting questions about gender and power. First, how do we explain the fact that in many countries around the world, women's right to vote and be elected to office does not translate into equal representation in their national governments? What barriers do women face when they seek elected office? The second question is one that gender scholars could only speculate about until fairly recently: How would it matter to have more women in positions of political power?

**FIGURE 11.3 ■ Share of Women in Legislatures Globally Has Grown, But Still Falls Short of Parity**


Share of women in legislatures globally has grown, but still falls short of parity
% of members of legislative bodies that are women
PARITY (50%)
2008
2019
World 18 24
Nordic countries 41 43
Caribbean 34 42
Central America 19 32
Western Europe 24 32
North America 20 27
South America 18 26
Sub-Saharan Africa 18 24
Eastern Europe 15 22
East Asia 18 21
Oceania 16 20
Central Asia 17 19
South Asia 17 18
Middle East and North Africa 8 17

*Source:* Pew Research Center analysis of data from Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2019). https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/18/the-share-of-women-in-legislatures-around-the-world-is-growing-but-they-are-still-underrepresented/

*Note:* As of Dec. 31, 2008, and Jan. 1, 2019. Includes 185 countries for which there are data available for both years, and South Sudan in 2019.

Political scientists call this *substantive representation* as opposed to *descriptive or numerical representation*. **Descriptive or numerical representation** is what we have been discussing—namely, the number of members of a particular group (here, women) who hold office. **Substantive representation** is the representation of group interests, or the extent to which the members of the particular group represent the interests of that group when they are elected (Carroll, 2001). If descriptive or numerical representation is not connected to substantive representation, then there's not much point

in keeping track of how many women are elected to government positions. But if electing women to positions of power does make a difference, what kinds of differences does it make? We'll start with the first question about why women are still underrepresented in the halls of power, and then we'll turn to the question of how women's presence in those halls has the possibility to change them.

## The Room Where It Happens: Descriptive Representation

In Lin-Manuel Miranda's groundbreaking Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, narrator and vice president Aaron Burr sings about wanting to be, like his rival Alexander Hamilton, in "the room where it happens." In the musical, the phrase refers to the Compromise of 1790 between Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. In general, the room where it happens serves as a good metaphor for the closed-door world of politics, where important decisions get made by powerful actors. Those, like Burr, stuck on the outside are cut off from participation.

The metaphor of being shut out of "the room where it happens" captures the ways in which entrance into the world of politics is about much more than electability or the ability to do the job successfully. The "room where it happens" is almost always a cis, straight, white male space, like social clubs and bars, and it suggests the ways in which politics is also much like a social club. As New Jersey state legislator Millicent Fenwick put it, "Women are on the outside when the door to the smoke-filled room is closed" (Conway et al., 2005, p. 106). A whole series of gatekeepers patrols access to the political realm long before voters ever enter the mix. Examining how gender affects who gets past these gates is one part of answering our first question about the descriptive or numerical representation of women.

In Chapter 9, we explored the historical division of the world into the public and private spheres in Anglo-European society that began roughly with industrialization in the 19th century. According to the doctrine of separate spheres, women belong in the home, taking care of children and providing a nurturing refuge for their family from the rational, dog-eat-dog world of the public sphere. The public sphere is the realm of men, and although it may be dog-eat-dog, it is also where the real and important actions of the world take place. The world of politics, as it has traditionally been conceived of, is clearly located in the public sphere.

By this argument, politics is already by its very nature masculine and, therefore, better left to the male half of the population. The doctrine of separate spheres was based, as we discussed in Chapter 9, on a division that never applied to the majority of the population in the Anglo-European world and that certainly doesn't apply to the lives of most people around the world today. Nonetheless, the division of the world into public and private spheres remains an important ideology shaping the way in which people around the world think about gender and politics or gender and leadership more generally.

### THINK ABOUT IT

*Can you think of other ways in which politics as an institution is inherently masculine? How would politics be different if this were not true? What would a more feminine politics look like? A genderless politics? Are such things possible?*

For example, in Peru, surveys demonstrate a strong level of support for women's participation in politics. This support includes quota measures for Peruvian political parties, which would dictate that a certain percentage (30% in 2000) of spots on "party lists" be set aside for female candidates. This system would be roughly equivalent to the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States being required to nominate women for a certain percentage of offices at the state and national levels.

In a 1998 survey, 75.6% of the Peruvian population supported the gender quotas, while in 2000, the percentage increased to 80.9% (Rousseau, 2005). These statistics demonstrate both that many Peruvians feel the participation of women in the political process is valuable and that they support state intervention (in the form of political party quotas) to ensure that participation. As further evidence for this support, in 2001, a Peruvian woman (Lourdes Flores Nano) came very close to winning the national presidential election, and she would have been the first woman to have done so in Peru without the benefit of family connections to a famous male politician.

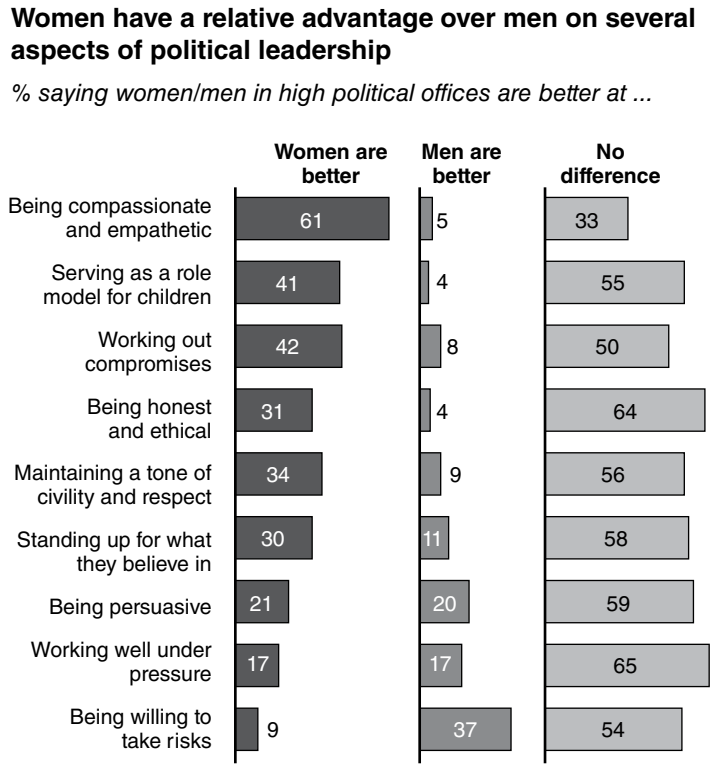
This strong support for women's roles in politics in Peru is especially interesting because these values do not challenge the basic ideology of the public and private spheres. In the Peruvian political context, politicians are generally considered to be corrupt, authoritarian, lazy, and self-centered; because those politicians have also tended to be men, many Peruvians have come to believe that women are a positive alternative. One survey asked Peruvians to compare male and female mayors, and respondents noted that although male mayors worked more and were more efficient, women as mayors were more honest, loyal, just, and sensitive to social and human issues (Rousseau, 2005).

In this sense, women's mothering and caring characteristics are perceived as valuable and necessary to clean up the political sphere and provide more trustworthy leadership than that provided by men in the past. The distinction of the qualities of the feminine, private sphere is maintained, but that distinction is considered a valuable contribution to counterbalance negative aspects of the public sphere. This particular dynamic resonates with arguments made by suffragists in the United States during the early part of the 20th century. Many women working to obtain the right to vote argued that women's unique moral superiority, as a result of their location in the caring and nurturing environment of the private sphere, would humanize politics in much the same way Peruvians today expect women to bring their own feminine perspective to the public sphere of politics.

Figure 11.4 presents some similar beliefs about women's and men's leadership strengths in the United States.

In the Peruvian case, the barriers to women's political participation represented by "the room where it happens" are overcome partially by the use of government-mandated quotas and by Peruvians' strong belief in the unique contributions women can bring to the political system. Other scholars who focus on understanding women's low rates of descriptive or numerical representation focus on the characteristics of women themselves. In essence, for a society to have a pool of potential women to be elected to political office, there must be a group of women willing to run and capable of running for these offices.

**FIGURE 11.4 ■ Women Have a Relative Advantage Over Men on Several Aspects of Political Leadership**




*Source:* Pew Research Center. (2018). Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 19–July 2, 2018. *Women and leadership 2018*. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/09/20/women-and-leadership-2018/

*Note:* Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

## WHO MAKES A GOOD LEADER? RACE, GENDER, AND ELECTABILITY

Figure 11.4 highlights how gender impacts perceptions of the qualities necessary for leadership and therefore electability for women as a broad category. What happens when gender is combined with race by looking specifically at perceptions of Black women as potential leaders?

This is the question asked by Amanda E. Mosier and Evava S. Pietri (2021) in their examination of Black women and electability. Voting behavior is a complex phenomenon, as recent elections in the United States have proven over and over. Certainly, many people vote along party lines, but when political party is taken out of the equation, what factors influence voting decisions? Social identities such as race, gender, and sexual identity are certainly important. For example, some polling research suggests that in the 2020 presidential election in the United

States, though many voters felt allied with the policies of Senator Elizabeth Warren, they didn't vote for her in Democratic primaries because they were worried about her "electability."

The concept of electability is, not surprisingly, tied to stereotypes and prejudices. One study in the U.S. found that voters tend to place high value on warmth and competence, placing slightly more value on competence (Funk, 1996, 1997). Women candidates tend to score high on warmth and low on competence, which affects their electability (Brown et al., 2018). Black candidates are generally perceived as less educated, less accomplished, less powerful, less well-spoken, and less leader-like but also more opinionated, more passionate, more vocal, and less manipulative (Schneider & Box, 2011).

We might expect these stereotypes and beliefs associated with gender and race to be combined in the perceptions of Black women's leadership abilities. **The double jeopardy hypothesis** suggests that Black women should face compounding discrimination because they belong to multiple marginalized groups—women and Black people. Most of the research on the "warm but incompetent" dynamic focuses on white women as candidates. Does the same dynamic apply to Black women?

Using an experimental method with fictional candidates of different genders and racial backgrounds, Mosier and Pietri found no significant relationship between race, gender, and perceptions of electability. Small effects suggested respondents saw female candidates as more competent and having greater leadership ability, contrary to much of the existing research and the researchers' original hypotheses. These findings could be due to the difference between deciding between fictional candidates and real-life candidates. In the experiment, respondents were provided with detailed information about the fictional candidates, such as their background and past accomplishments in office. Still, an experiment can't replicate the kind of information voters receive about real-life candidates. Social desirability—the pressure to not reveal attitudes or beliefs that aren't socially acceptable—could affect the results as well. Perhaps respondents didn't want to reveal their gender and racial stereotypes. This preliminary study suggests that more research is needed and also that there might be differences between our abstract ideas about what makes a candidate electable compared to our actual voting behaviors.

## Does Gender Equality Improve Under Democracies?

In Anglo-European narratives of modernization and development, the introduction of democracy and capitalism is assumed to bring along a broad-scale liberalization of society, including improved gender equality. This was not true for the introduction of colonialism to many nations in the global South, and it is often no more true for the advent of democracy. In many precolonial societies of sub-Saharan Africa, women exercised political and economic rights that did not translate into full equality with men but that did sometimes allow them to hold high political positions (Yoon, 2005). Women in precolonial societies often had control over economic resources, including access to land and the ability to control household budgets and to engage in trade.

Under colonialism, women lost their political positions when colonial powers recognized only men as chiefs or intermediaries for administrating their organizational needs. When colonial administrators chose native Africans to train for low-level administrative positions or to

receive education in European languages and other skills, they imposed their own European gender systems by choosing boys and men rather than girls and women.

Women had little power in the colonial administrative system controlled largely by men, and laws imposed by colonial powers further eroded the economic and political powers women had once had. For example, colonial powers did away with communal land ownership in many African societies, and the individualization of property rights usually resulted in men receiving the titles. Customary laws imposed by colonial powers also treated women in sub-Saharan Africa as minors, effectively under the authority of males.

Although in some countries, these laws are changing, there are still countries in this part of Africa in which women are not entitled to own, inherit, or dispose of land or to receive financial credit legally (Yoon, 2001). Women cannot open a bank account without their husband's permission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and in Botswana, a woman cannot have legal guardianship of her own children. In many of these countries, women's rights to property ownership may be protected by official laws, but they are not recognized by local customs (Benschop, 2004).

In many ways, then, the exposure to European gender ideology through colonization increased the levels of gender inequality in sub-Saharan Africa and left women legally deprived of many basic rights. Women were involved in the struggles against colonial powers in many countries, and after decolonization, women in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa were granted the right to vote and hold office at the same time that their nations gained independence from colonial powers.

However, until the 1990s, many of the nations of sub-Saharan Africa were characterized by single-party, authoritarian rule. In places like the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), strongmen like Joseph Mobutu ruled as dictators, outlawing the existence of any political parties besides their own and turning many African nations into effective tyrannies. Beginning in the 1990s, more than 40 African countries began the transition to a multiparty democratic system and began holding presidential and parliamentary elections with candidates from more than a single party. The process of democratization, not without its complications and setbacks, began for many African countries in earnest during this period. The question this transition raises for many gender scholars is whether the introduction of democracy increases women's numerical and descriptive representation in those nations and, ultimately, whether that translates into substantive representation.

On the one hand, scholars argue that democratization creates a more favorable environment for women to become more active in the public and, therefore, political spheres, thus potentially increasing descriptive representation. Democracy should also encourage political parties to include more female candidates and to give more weight to women's issues. This argument takes the basic position that democracy creates more space for women's political involvement and for the articulation of concerns related to gender inequality than that which exists in authoritarian regimes. From this perspective, women are just simply better off under a democracy. With the breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of many of the authoritarian regimes that existed under communist control in Latin American and Eastern and Central European nations, scholars had a chance to test these assumptions empirically.

Research often revealed that women's representation in governing bodies actually decreased in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy. In many of these countries, the numerical representation of women in institutional politics has decreased relative to their numbers under authoritarian regimes, as in the case of Soviet legislatures that witnessed the exit of women from elected office under the process of democratization associated with perestroika (Yoon, 2001). In the former communist nation of Hungary, women's representation in parliament before the first democratic elections in 1990 was as high as 30%. Candidates under the communist system were nominated by the state party, and quotas were allocated to both certain regions and demographic groups, such as women. In the first democratic elections in Hungary, the percentage of women in parliament dropped to 7%, and it has averaged around 10% ever since (Kardos-Kaponyi, 2005).

In light of these outcomes, some researchers began to revise their theories about the relationship between democracy and gender equality in the political realm. Gender scholars argue that although democracy may provide more opportunities and freedom for women to pursue political power through elected office, the process of democratization does not necessarily change the underlying structures of society that might make women's entry into politics difficult.

Namely, the introduction of democracy does not change the social and economic inequalities that already existed between women and men, nor does it magically remove the gender ideologies resistant to women holding positions of power (Yoon, 2001). These three factors—social inequality, economic inequality, and culture in the form of gender ideologies—are also important factors in determining the numerical representation of women in elected office in addition to the particular structures various governments take in different nations. Where democracy leaves these areas of social life untouched, democratization is less likely to lead to increasing numbers of women gaining access to political power.

Social and economic inequality are two important barriers to women's political participation, but gender ideologies can also serve as critical roadblocks. The doctrine of separate spheres is one part of this gender ideology that exists in sub-Saharan Africa and around the world, where women's primary roles are as mothers and wives. These cultural barriers mean that women are less likely to view themselves as potential politicians, while voters are less likely to vote for women stepping outside their place within the private sphere. Adult women in one survey were half as likely to have thought "many times" about running for political office and 20 points more likely to say they had never thought about running for political office at all (Steiger, 2013). In a U.S. study, women were also significantly less confident about their chances of winning than men—and more likely to think of themselves as unqualified and incapable.

These internalized notions on the part of potential women candidates themselves are, in part, the result of socialization and, specifically, the political socialization that occurs in different countries. **Political socialization** is "the process by which people learn what is expected of them in their particular political system" (Conway et al., 2005, p. 22). At this point, it's not surprising to realize that the political socialization experienced by women is very different from that experienced by men in many parts of the world. Women are socialized to be more passive than men and to direct their concerns toward things not usually thought of as political (e.g., marriage, having children, doing housework). In many societies, historically and still today,

women are not socialized into a sense of **political efficacy**, or the sense that "what a person does really matters" (Conway et al., 2005, p. 23), and women are not made to believe that they can make a real difference in the political realm.

These aspects of culture prevent many women from running for office, but those women who do run for office often face very real manifestations of cultural beliefs throughout their campaigns that women are not fit to be political leaders, in the form of violence, intimidation, ostracism, and verbal abuse (Yoon, 2005). One woman involved in Zambian politics in the 1950s described the ways in which party officials warned her husband that allowing his wife to be involved in politics would cause others in the community to label him as "no man" because of his inability to control his wife's activities. The female politician herself was "despised" by other women, who accused her of making adultery easier by mixing so much with men and of breaking up her own home (Geisler, 1995).

These kinds of hostilities on the part of women and men occur, in part, because the doctrine of separate spheres means that women who run for political office are more likely to be perceived as private individuals rather than as public figures (Conway et al., 2005). If women's natural place is in the home, caring for husbands and children, those women who do seek political power are perceived as unnatural, and their means for gaining power are considered to be dubious at best (Dixon, 1992). In the United States, Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, in her role as Speaker of the House of Representatives, has been questioned by the media about her ability to lead as a woman. An anchor at MSNBC questioned whether Pelosi's "personal feelings were getting in the way of effective leadership," suggesting that this was not a problem that arises with "male-run leadership posts" and that men are "more capable of taking personality clashes" than women (as quoted in Boehlert & Foser, 2006).

Other news figures ignored Pelosi's leadership style altogether, focusing instead on her appearance and attire, quipping that Pelosi "dresses a lot better" (as quoted in Boehlert & Foser, 2006) than former senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. Research in political science and communication has documented a media bias against women when they run for office. In the United States, women who run for Congress and governor receive less overall coverage, less issue coverage, more negative coverage, and more coverage focused on their dress and appearance than their male counterparts (Conroy, 2016). In her 2016 presidential race, Hillary Clinton's gender became an issue even before the Democratic primary. Republican front-runner Donald Trump accused Clinton of playing the "woman card," claiming that her success is due to her gender. He also questioned her "strength" and "stamina" and attacked her for being the enabling spouse of an abuser of women (Chozick & Parker, 2016).

## Strangers in the Halls of Power: Substantive Representation

Women have often found themselves on the outside of "the room where it happens" and, therefore, denied initial entry through election into the halls of power. Our second question addresses what happens to women once they gain entry into these halls and what further doors remain open or closed. In 1991, the U.S. Senate debated whether to pursue extensive questioning of Clarence Thomas, a nominee for the Supreme Court who had been accused of sexual

harassment by a former colleague, Anita Hill. Two days after the accusations were made, it remained unclear whether the House and Senate would explore the charges in Thomas's confirmation hearings. Seven Democratic women from the House and Senate, accompanied by reporters, walked to the committee room in the Senate where the Democratic caucus was discussing how to proceed and knocked on the door.

Initially, a senior congressional aide told the contingent they would not be allowed in, but with some pressure from Barbara Boxer, a senator from California, and the possibility of the story showing up in the press, the group of women was able to meet with the senate majority leader to express their concerns. Another senator later explained to Boxer that the women were refused entry because strangers were not allowed in that room, *strangers* here meaning anyone who was not a senator. Boxer responded by noting that "the truth is that women have been strangers in the Senate . . . strangers in the highest, most powerful legislative body in the world" (Conway et al., 2005, p. 107).

The accusation of sexual harassment against Thomas was discussed as part of his confirmation hearings, but only after female politicians were forced to, as described by Boxer, "pound on a closed door, to have to beg to be heard on a crucial issue that couldn't really wait for niceties" (as quoted in Conway et al., 2005, p. 107). More recently, Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed despite detailed testimony by Christine Blasey Ford that the justice had sexually assaulted her years ago when they were high school students together. Despite Ford's painful recounting of the alleged assault, Senators voted to confirm Kavanaugh. What do these stories begin to suggest about the degree to which numerical representation for women translates into substantive representation in the halls of power around the globe?

More recently, repeated examples emerge of women elected officials being excluded even from the political conversations it would make the most sense for them to participate in. In 2014, before the 2022 Supreme Court case, *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, struck down *Roe v. Wade*, the House of Representatives Subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice held a hearing on HR 7, the "No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act." The subcommittee deciding whether to make abortions less affordable, and therefore out of reach for many women, consisted of 12 men and no women (Culp-Ressler, 2014). At a 2012 hearing by the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee on birth control access, the five-person panel didn't include any women. Sandra Fluke, the woman recommended as a witness by the Democrats on the committee, was rejected as not qualified (Zornick, 2012). These cases prove that even when women are elected to political office, they are excluded from the conversations that have the potential to most directly affect women's lives.

The issues of numerical or descriptive representation and substantive representation are closely related. In the previous example, seven women from the Senate and House of Representatives formed a large and influential enough group to have their voices heard in a way that would have been more difficult for one or two female legislators. But the kinds of political positions to which women gain access also matter. In Senegal, female legislators were able to push for the successful passage of legislation that outlawed the practice of female circumcision in 1998. But other pieces of legislation related to women's issues were held up by the minority status of women in the legislature and by women's poor representation in

the parliamentary executive. Not surprisingly, the ability of women to pass legislation is aided by women occupying powerful positions within the governing body, whether that be vice presidents, elected secretaries in Senegal, or Speaker of the House or chairs of committees in the United States.

In South Africa, when both the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the legislature were women, as were chairs of 10 parliamentary committees, a wide range of legislation catering to women's issues was made into law. This included the legalization of abortion, the criminalization of domestic violence, granting wives equal legal status with their husbands in marriage, and banning discrimination in the workplace—as well as instituting affirmative action plans (Yoon, 2005). In the United States, female representatives working on issues of women's health were greatly aided in the 103rd Congress by the presence of women members on the Appropriations Labor, Health, and Human Services subcommittee. As one lobbyist involved in the legislation recalled, the

> women on the Appropriations Committee . . . really went to bat for us. . . . It's very easy to get members of Congress to say they're for more money for breast cancer research. . . . But it's not so easy to find members of Congress who are willing to actually pick up the banner and go into battle on the issue. (Dodson, 1998, p. 139)

Women in positions of political power find it easier to translate their interests into real results when certain doors of power are open to them.

Interviews with women in the House of Representatives in the United States suggest that women elected to political office feel some responsibility to represent the interests of other women, even in the face of initial reluctance. Representative Marge Roukema, a Republican congresswoman from New Jersey, described how when she first came to Congress, she wanted to avoid being stereotyped as a "woman legislator" and hoped to work on things like banking and finance. But she "learned very quickly that if women like me in Congress were not going to attend to some of these family concerns . . . then they weren't going to be attended to" (Dodson, 1998, p. 133). Representative Patsy Mink from Hawaii also felt initially that her role was primarily to represent all of her constituents, women and men, and her home state. But with time, she realized her far greater role was also to "speak for all the women in America" (Dodson, 1998, p. 133). Roukema, Mink, and the testimonies of other congresswomen demonstrate their sense of the special role they play as women in political office. Although they may, like Roukema, initially wish to distance themselves from "women's" issues, they discover that if they, as women, do not focus on these issues, no one else will. These women acknowledge a unique perspective and unique responsibility they have as women.

In fact, research demonstrates that women in elected and appointed offices in the United States have distinctive policy priorities compared with their male colleagues. Women have focused far more than men on issues related to women, children, and the family (Dodson, 1991; Palley, 2001; Swers, 1998; Thomas, 1994, 2003; Thomas & Welch, 1991). Although these are not the only issues women have focused on, they are the issues around which women in office have tended to have the most success, as women have achieved passage of legislation in these areas at a faster rate than men (Thomas, 2003).

Women may also bring a different kind of process to political decision-making in general. Research in the United States suggests that women tend to view public policy problems more broadly, leading them to approach solutions to those problems in a different manner. For example, whereas male politicians are more likely to view criminal behavior as a simple matter of an individual breaking a law, women are more likely to look for the societal factors that might lead to criminal behavior (Thomas, 2003). Legislation crafted by women is therefore more likely to address the roots of problems than is that written by men.

The ways in which getting women elected matters is demonstrated in the case of Nevada, which, after the 2018 midterm elections, became the first state in the United States to have a majority of female legislators. The effects of that transition have been felt in big and small ways. In small ways, women have been empowered to speak out. In the course of a debate, one male Republican senator defended a centuries-old law that required doctors to ask women seeking abortions whether they were married. Yvanna Cancela, a newly elected Democratic woman senator, fired back, "A man is not asked his marital status before he gets a vasectomy." The room fell silent. Cancela worried about her comment being seen as "crass" but probably wouldn't have made the comment in a legislature dominated by men.

The culture of the legislature itself changed with a female majority. For decades, charges of sexual harassment were shrugged off or belittled in the statehouse, while bills sponsored by women were sometimes mocked. In 2015, legislative leaders refused to schedule a hearing on a bill to promote pay equity for women. Patricia Ann Spearman, the Democratic senator who sponsored the bill, explained, "The boys club was like, 'Why do we need that?' It was a very misogynistic session." Even in 2017, the culture of sexism lingered. The legislature approved a statewide referendum on whether to repeal the "pink tax" on necessities such as tampons and diapers. But one assemblyman argued that the bill would create a "slippery slope," asking, "Can I add my jockstrap to the list?" Even with a female majority, women legislators receive anonymous calls from men commenting on their lips and threatening sexual violence. Another assemblywoman was constantly asked by her male colleague, "Have you been a good girl today?"

Having a female-majority legislature impacts not just the culture of the political body but also which bills get considered and passed. Since the Nevada legislature began its session, bills prioritizing women's health and safety have risen to the top of the agenda. More than 17 bills were considered that dealt with sexual assault, sex trafficking, and sexual misconduct, including measures that would make it easier to prosecute offenders. Bills that would ban child marriage and examine the causes of maternal mortality also made it onto the docket (Wax-Thibodeaux, 2019). In May 2019, the legislature bucked U.S. trends toward making women's access to abortion increasingly limited by passing the Trust Nevada's Women Act, a law that removes restrictions on women's ability to get an abortion (North, 2019).

## Gendered Leadership Styles

Having women majorities in the government changes the culture as well as the focus of bills that are passed and debated. What about the style of leadership employed by elected officials and others in power? Debates about exactly how to define leadership rage across many

disciplines, but many gender scholars have pointed out that many of the social settings that serve as exemplars of leadership are traditionally dominated by men (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Rosener, 1990). Carol Gilligan (1982) used psychoanalytic theory to argue that women as leaders tend to emphasize cooperation over conflict, inclusion over exclusion, and consensus over hierarchy.

Gilligan argued that because of differences in early caregiver dynamics, men tend to be more concerned about people interfering with each other's rights in moral dilemmas, and this masculine approach is commonly called an **ethic of justice**. Women, according to Gilligan, are more worried about not helping others when they could be helped, or with the possibility of omission; this feminine approach is referred to as an **ethic of care** (Kathlene, 1998).

A great deal of research in political science has focused on proving or disproving Gilligan's theories about these two different ethics, and the differences in approaches to public policy problems as discussed here fit into this line of research. Women's ethic of care leads them to form a more contextual view of the world, emphasizing the complex web of interrelationships that connect people and make them deeply interdependent. With this worldview, it makes sense that the policy solutions often pursued by women reflect this broader perspective on how people's lives are involved in causing social problems and how this complex web might be affected by any proposed solutions.

Some research on women in positions of political leadership confirms this theory of feminine leadership styles. Women chairs of legislative committees place more emphasis on getting the job done and accomplishing their tasks in a team-oriented way rather than using unidirectional power than do their male colleagues (Bell & Rosenthal, 2003; Rosenthal, 1998). Another study shows that in state legislatures, women tend to exhibit consensus styles of leadership rather than the command-and-control styles more likely to be used by male legislatures (Whicker & Jewell, 1998). This research suggests that if the number of women in positions of political power increases over time, their presence does have the potential to transform the operations of institutional power in significant ways. But associating women with certain styles of leadership can also serve as a means to exclude them from certain areas of decision-making.

In the United States, foreign policy has traditionally been considered off-limits for women, with the exceptions of Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and more recently, Hillary Clinton (McGlen & Sarkees, 2001). Women are seldom interviewed on television, quoted in newspapers, or appointed to positions of authority in foreign policy areas, and this may be attributed in part to the image of women as peacemakers. Using a consensus leadership style may be useful in legislative bodies, but both men and women may view the feminine ethic of care as incompatible with the job of protecting national interests. Perceptions of women as exercising this more feminine leadership style may inhibit their access to these crucial global leadership roles.

In addition, the debate about whether women truly do bring an ethic of care with them into the political world is ongoing and hardly resolved. Studies have found that women use both styles of moral reasoning—an ethic of care and an ethic of justice (Plutzer, 2000)—while others have pointed to the importance of context in determining leadership styles. For example, legislative and executive leadership are generally viewed differently, in a distinctly gendered

light (Tolleson-Rinehart, 2001). Legislative leadership is perceived as feminine, while executive leadership is perceived as masculine, and women who serve in executive positions (as governors, judges, cabinet secretaries, and in the military) certainly experience pressure to conform to the leadership style associated with that particular institution and position.

Many women who gain positions of political power certainly do feel an obligation to represent the voices of women, and although they face many obstacles in pursuing these issues, women's access to positions of institutional power within governments does seem to make a difference. As we have discussed, the effectiveness of women in politics is often limited by a variety of factors, sometimes including disagreement among women themselves about exactly what issues and agendas they should be pursuing. At this point, we should know to mistrust any quick and easy way in which to formulate a set of programs that covers the issues faced by many types of women. In the United States, women in Congress find it easier to reach agreement on issues related to women's health, but they are sometimes less likely to form a coherent front on issues of abortion or health care reform in general because party lines can dictate different positions on these issues (Dodson, 1998). One study revealed that women in Congress in the United States are less likely to vote together on foreign aid, budgetary, and defense issues (Clark, 1998).

In Senegal, women members of parliament experience divisions between those from polygamous families and those who are not (Yoon, 2005). Research on African American women in the Congress demonstrates that compared with their white female counterparts, Black female representatives stated stronger support for policies geared toward women's interests, such as state-mandated comparable-worth policies, laws forbidding landlords from discriminating against families with children, and publicly funded parental leave (Barrett, 2001). This evidence reminds us that any two women could take opposite viewpoints on an issue or policy, both firmly believing they are representing women's interests. Research also seems to suggest that as women's numerical representation increases, their substantive representation increases as well. When women find their way into political positions of power, they can have a real effect on gender inequality.

Recently, some gender scholars have begun to wonder whether focusing solely on elected positions in an examination of political power provides the fullest picture of women's roles in politics. **State feminism** refers to all the activities of governments that are officially charged with furthering women's status and rights (Stetson & Mazur, 1995). These may or may not involve elected officials and can include many types of activities that still have important consequences for the lives of women in these countries. Gender scholars who study state feminism argue that the formation of structures within governments whose main purpose is to better women's social status is an equally important consequence of women's movements and can have important effects on gender equality in those nations (Stetson & Mazur, 1995). From this perspective, there are other ways to affect gender policies than merely electing women to political office.

## Symbolic Violence

As we discussed at the beginning of this chapter, power is a tricky thing. Those who have it don't always realize they do. Those who don't sometimes get tricked into supporting the very system that oppresses them. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu was interested in social class as well as power,

and his concept of symbolic violence is useful as applied to many types of inequality. Symbolic violence refers to acts leading to the misrecognition or distortion of underlying power relations (Appleruth & Edles, 2011). Symbolic violence describes the ways in which relations of domination take on a kind of "naturalness" that prevents anyone from questioning their existence.

Symbolic violence tells us that it's normal or okay to have only 26% women in the United States Congress. Symbolic violence provides many reasons that sound convincing for why a woman has not held the highest executive office in the U.S. government. Even more than that, symbolic violence makes us believe that there's nothing we can do about these situations; this is why Bourdieu sees these dynamics as a kind of violence. Believing in the naturalness of inequalities destroys our sense that things could be different and that we can organize to change them. Symbolic violence is the voice that tells us there's no sense in even making the effort to organize. While more subtle than the threat of physical violence, symbolic violence is powerful all the same. If we didn't believe that things are just the way they are and there's nothing we can do about it, what could we accomplish?

## THINK ABOUT IT

*What are some specific examples of symbolic violence as applied to gender inequality? What beliefs in the "naturalness" of gender inequality prevent people from organizing for change?*

## BIG QUESTIONS

- How would you answer the questions raised in this chapter about the connections between gender and power? Do you agree that one of the main purposes of gender as a system is to distribute power to men? What evidence would you provide for your position? What are the implications if gender is inextricably linked to power? What does this imply for the connections we've discussed between inequality and difference?
- Which theories from this book fit in well with the perspective that one of the main purposes of gender is to distribute power? Think about the ways in which all these theories define what gender is and which seem to include a concern with gender and power. Which theories seem less compatible with this perspective?
- In this chapter, we discussed the application of Title IX to the prevention of sexual assault on campus. Do you think changing the system of punishment for those who commit sexual assault is the best way to address this problem? What parts of sexual assault discussed in this chapter does this approach leave unaddressed?
- In this chapter, we raised questions about ethnocentrism and human rights and about the dangers of using our own cultural lens to judge the practices of other cultures. Is it

possible to overcome this problem by developing a universal system of morality, or way of defining what is right and wrong? How would you go about doing that? What might the potential dangers be of developing one universal definition of morality?

- Some women in elected office experience pressure to represent women and women's issues in their positions. Do you think men experience similar kinds of pressures? What are the potential effects of these pressures on women in elected office, and how might it limit the power of women in elected office? What are other situations in which people from a certain social group might experience pressure to represent that group and their interests?
- What would the world look like if the power differential between women and men were reversed and women occupied most of the most powerful positions in society? Would the world be different? Is there something essentially different about women that would make a world in which they had more power different, or would having power make women act differently? In other words, is it about the power or about gender? How would your own life be different in this new world?
- What would the world look like if gender itself disappeared? How would power be distributed in a genderless world? Would some kinds of power be more or less important (coercive power versus authority)? How much impact would getting rid of gender have on the systems of power?

## GENDER EXERCISES

1. Test your friends' knowledge of women's history and women's role in history. Ask them to name 10 famous historical men and 10 famous historical women in the United States. Entertainers (actresses and musicians) don't count. How many women, on average, can people name? You might then do some library research on famous women in history, starting with women's involvement with some of the social movements listed in this chapter.
2. Do some research and reading on your own about some of the issues surrounding prostitution. Find sources that represent both of the perspectives discussed in this chapter—that prostitution should always be illegal and that prostitution can be legal if the rights of sex workers are protected. You might start with the laws regarding prostitution in different countries. Write an essay in which you use the evidence you've gathered to explain your own position on this issue.
3. In this chapter, we discussed potential gender differences in political participation and political efficacy. Conduct some interviews or do a survey on these topics, comparing women and men. You might ask questions that measure how knowledgeable women and men are about political issues and whether they have ever run for an office or considered running for a political office. You might also include questions about political efficacy, or how powerful your respondents feel to make a meaningful difference politically. Do gender differences seem to emerge in your interviews or surveys? What other characteristics seem to matter?

4. Pick a political race that involves a woman candidate and do a content analysis of the coverage of that candidate. You might compare the coverage of the female candidate with that of a male counterpart. What, if any, gender differences do you notice in how the press talks about the two candidates? Do stories about the female candidate seem to place more emphasis on her personal life or family (private sphere), on her feminine qualities (e.g., ability to compromise, empathize), on her lack of experience, or on her appearance? Is this significantly different than the coverage of male candidates?
5. Investigate the idea of the geography of fear as it connects to gender. Interview men and women about whether they have ever felt unsafe in a public space. Ask them about specific places in your community or neighborhood and how safe they assume those places to be. Ask them for stories about specific times when they felt unsafe or were harassed in a public space. If they had these experiences, how did they deal with them? Do gender differences emerge in your interviews? What kinds of things lead women and men to feel unsafe in public spaces? Do women seem to have a geography of fear?
6. If you have access to a college or university campus, do some observations of the party scene to compare to the descriptions by Armstrong et al. (2006) that you read in this chapter. If you have access, you might observe in a Greek house as well as in other locations such as dorms or non-Greek parties. What are the gender dynamics of these social events? Do women and men seem to be following the interaction routines as described by Armstrong et al.? How prevalent is alcohol use? How does the social scene vary across different types of social groups on campus?

## WHAT CAN YOU DO? RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

**He for She**

United Nations' sponsored global initiative to get men involved in gender equality.

www.heforshe.org/en

**Men Stopping Violence**

A national training institute that provides organizations, communities, and individuals with the knowledge and tools required to mobilize men to prevent violence against women and girls.

http://menstoppingviolence.org

**Men Can Stop Rape**

A national nonprofit organization leading "the call to redefine masculinity and male strength as part of preventing men's violence against women."

http://www.mencanstoprape.org/Resources/us-mens-anti-violence-organizations.html

**United Nations Women**

UN Women is the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, which works to accelerate the United Nations' goals on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation

**She Should Run**

A nonpartisan organization "expanding the talent pool of future elected female leaders."

www.sheshouldrun.org

## KEY TERMS

Authority
Biology-based ideologies
Burkas
Coercive power
Cultural relativism
Deference
Descriptive or numerical representation
The double jeopardy hypothesis
Emasculation
Ethic of care
Ethic of justice
Feminization of poverty
Gender naturalization work
Gender panics
Geography of fear
Head and master laws
Hegemonic definition of manhood
Hijab
Human trafficking
Identity-based ideologies
Institutionalized power
Interaction routines
Marital rape
Political efficacy
Political elite
Political socialization
Power
State feminism
Substantive representation

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# GLOSSARY

**Accountability:** the ways in which we gear our actions with attention to our specific circumstances so that others will correctly recognize our actions for what they are.

**Accounts:** the descriptions we engage in as social actors to explain to each other the state of affairs, or what we think is going on.

**Adult leisure:** leisure spent purely in the company of adults.

**Ageism:** prejudice or discrimination directed at a person or group based on their chronological or perceived age.

**Agents of socialization:** the people, groups, and institutions doing the socializing.

**Allocation:** in doing-gender theory, the way decisions get made about who does what, who gets what and who does not, who gets to make plans, and who gets to give orders or take them.

**Androcentrism:** the belief that masculinity and what men do in our culture is superior to femininity and what women do.

**Aromantic:** having no romantic drive or desire to find a romantic partner.

**Asexuality:** category of sexual identity describing people who do not experience sexual attraction.

**Audience power theory:** a perspective that places the power to determine the popularity of any given media content squarely in the hands of the people making informed decisions about what they like and don't like.

**Authority:** the power that comes from a position in an organization or institution that is widely regarded as legitimate.

**Backlash:** a strong and adverse reaction by a large number of people to a political development.

**Back stage:** actions hidden from others, where people can be "themselves" and audience is restricted.

**Be a Big Wheel:** emphasizes the way in which masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth, and status; one of the rules of manhood.

**Be a Sturdy Oak:** the idea that men should never show vulnerability or weakness, even when they are in a potentially vulnerable position; one of the rules of manhood.

**Beauty myth:** the belief in a quality called beauty that is real and universal and that women, as a result of biological, sexual, and evolutionary factors, should want to embody, while men should desire the women who embody that ideal of beauty.

**Biology-based ideologies:** assume a natural, male–female binary that can be objectively measured at the level of chromosomes, genitalia, or hormones.

**Biosocial approach:** an approach to the relationship between gender and sex category that views only gender as socially constructed.

**Bodily autonomy:** the right to make decisions about one's own body, especially for women, nonbinary, and trans people.

**Body image:** the perception and evaluation of one's own bodily appearance.

**Body positivity movement:** a social movement that advocates for the acceptance of all bodies, regardless of size, shape, skin tone, gender, or physical abilities.

**Breach:** a social experimental method used by ethnomethodologists that disrupts normal social interactional rules to reveal the taken-for-granted norms of our everyday lives.

**Burkas:** tentlike garments that cover a woman's entire body, leaving a tiny transparent bit of cloth for her to see out of and negotiate the world.

**Calling:** a courtship practice in which men come to call at the homes of their potential love interest.

**Cisheteropatriarchy:** the interconnections between gender identity, gender inequality, and sexuality, or the ways in which the dominance associated with a gender binary system also presumes heterosexuality as a social norm.

**Coercive power:** the ability to impose one's will by force, threats, or deceit.

**Cognitive-development theory:** a perspective on gender socialization that emphasizes the ways in which children acquire a sense of a gender identity and the ability to gender-type themselves and others.

**Collectivistic:** societies in which the needs of the group are more important than the needs of individuals.

**Colonialism:** the building and maintenance of colonies in one region by people from another region.

**Commodify:** to turn (a thing) into something that can be bought or sold.

**Companionate marriage:** the expectation that spouses experience romantic and sexual attraction to each other.

**Comparable worth:** a policy that seeks to raise the wages of low-paying jobs occupied predominantly by women by evaluating the gendered ways in which jobs are socially constructed.

**Complicit masculinity:** men who do not perfectly conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity but still receive the benefits of patriarchy; this category includes most men.

**Compulsive heterosexuality:** the way in which heterosexuality becomes institutionalized into the practice of daily life and therefore enforced as a way of regulating our behaviors and distributing power and privilege.

**Confirmation bias:** the tendency to look for information that confirms one's preexisting beliefs while ignoring information that contradicts those beliefs.

**Conjugality:** the personal relationship between husband and wife.

**Consciousness-raising:** activities that seek to help women see the connection between their personal experiences with gender exploitation and the politics and structure of society.

**Contaminated leisure:** leisure that involves other nonleisure activities.

**Cultural genitalia:** the outward performance of gender that is assumed to match up with biological genitalia.

**Cultural relativism:** a perspective that encourages us to view other cultures through their own lens rather than through ours.

**Culture disablement:** what occurs when disabled women are excluded from normative beauty discourses and the aforementioned assumption that disabled women are unwilling or unable to ascribe to cultural standards of beauty.

**Culture industry:** the groups, organizations, individuals, and corporations involved in producing cultural products such as television, movies, magazines, books, and Internet content.

**Decolonization:** a process of examining and undoing the privileges that come from the historical and present-day project of colonialism.

**Deference:** when individuals engage in behavior that seems to support a dominant group's power over them.

**Degendered parenting:** a way of dividing housework and childcare based on personal choice, aptitude, and fairness rather than the gendered division of labor.

**Demographics:** in social science research, a way to describe the basic population characteristics of a group, including distribution, the sex ratio, how long people live, and the composition of different racial and ethnic groups.

**Descriptive or numerical representation:** the number of individuals in a particular group who hold office.

**Development project:** post–World War II, the division of the world into developed and developing countries and the belief that the developed world was obligated to help the rest of the world progress economically and socially.

**Diaspora:** the worldwide scattering of a nationality or ethnic group.

**Doctrine of separate spheres:** an ideology that evolved in Anglo-European societies with industrialization that

separates a man's and a woman's spheres of duties and responsibilities.

**Double standard:** a cultural belief in Anglo-European society that the exact same sexual behaviors or feelings are okay for one gender but not for the other.

**Dual-earner couples:** households in which both spouses are engaged in paid work outside the home.

**Ego boundaries:** the sense of personal psychological division between ourselves and the world around us.

**Emasculation:** taking away or reducing masculinity, whether by women or by other men.

**Embodiment:** a social process through which women and men as active social agents develop their bodies as both the objects and agents of practice.

**Emotional intimacy:** sharing aspects of the self with others with the goal of mutual understanding.

**Enculturation:** how culture comes to reside inside individuals.

**Ethic of care:** the idea that in moral dilemmas, women are more worried about not helping others when they could be helped.

**Ethic of justice:** the idea that in moral dilemmas, men tend to be more concerned about people interfering with each other's rights.

**Ethnocentrism:** believing one's own culture to be better, more correct, or right relative to another culture.

**Ethnomethodology:** a subfield in sociology concerned with the taken-for-granted assumptions of social interaction.

**Eugenics:** the study or practice of improving the human race through selective breeding and sometimes restrictive migration policies.

**Exploitation theory of marriage:** argument that marriage is an institution that primarily involves the exploitation of women in a system of exchange.

**Expressive:** a role oriented toward interactions with other people.

**Face-to-face:** in sex difference research, a way of describing women's friendships as characterized by an intimate confidante with whom they can share their feelings.

**False consciousness:** a concept from Marx that explains that some institutions can exert enough power over the way people think to mislead them about the true state of affairs and usually about relations of power in a society.

**Families of choice:** friendship networks constructed to compensate for the lack of supportive family ties.

**Family leisure:** leisure spent with children.

**Family myths:** beliefs and patterns of behavior that allow partners to retain their feminist commitments to equality in the face of a contradictory family structure.

**Family wage:** the idea that workers should be paid a sum necessary to sustain all family members.

**Female circumcision:** the ritual removal or cutting of some or all parts of external female genitalia.

**Feminization of poverty:** the economic disadvantages experienced by female-headed households relative to male-headed households.

**Fictive kin:** symbolic family members.

**Formal economy:** the sector of the economy regulated by the government or legal systems.

**Formal organization:** a group of people who interact regularly and have a set of explicit, written rules.

**Friendship:** a voluntary, informal, and personal relationship.

**Friends with benefits:** having sex in a nonromantic friendship.

**Front stage:** performance of roles more purposefully geared toward others' expectations.

**Fundamental attribution error:** the tendency to explain behavior by invoking personal dispositions while ignoring the roles of social structure and context.

**Gender assignment:** the gender category assigned, usually at birth and usually by a doctor.

**Gender attribution:** the interactional process of reading the many different cues people present in order to decide whether someone is a woman, a man, or some other gender.

**Gender binary:** the belief in two and only two natural, discrete gender categories into which all individuals fit.

**Gender congruency:** in cognitive-development theory, the need for children to create cognitive consistency by lining up their gender identity with their behaviors.

**Gender constancy:** the understanding that even changing the outward physical appearance of a person does not change his or her underlying sex category.

**Gendered division of labor:** a sense that certain tasks are more appropriate to one gender or the other.

**Gendered organization:** a social aggregate in which "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Acker, 1990, p. 146).

**Gender identity:** one's internal sense of one's gender.

**Gender naturalization work:** furiously reasserting the male–female binary to quell the gender panic.

**Gender norms:** sets of rules for what is appropriate masculine and feminine behavior in a given culture.

**Gender panics:** situations in which people react to disruptions to biology-based ideologies by frantically asserting the naturalness of the male–female binary.

**Gender polarization:** the way in which behaviors and attitudes that are viewed as appropriate for men are viewed as inappropriate for women and vice versa.

**Gender schema:** a cognitive structure that enables us to sort characteristics and behaviors into masculine and feminine categories and then create various other associations with those categories.

**Gender schema theory:** a theory of gender socialization that builds on the framework of both cognitive-development and social learning theory to formulate an explanation specific to gender socialization rather than to socialization as a more general process; it is influenced by feminism and emphasizes the content of gender schemas.

**Gender socialization:** the process through which individuals learn the gender norms of their society and come to develop an internal gender identity.

**Gender stability:** when children know that their gender is permanent and that it is the gender they will be for the rest of their lives.

**Gender transgression zone:** any activities or behaviors that have the potential to be perceived as violating gender norms in some way.

**Gender variant categories:** systems that institutionalize social roles and identities that extend beyond a binary, allowing for the existence of more than two gender categories.

**Gender wage gap:** the ratio of women's average earnings in an occupation to men's average earnings in the same occupation.

**Genitaltubercle:** undifferentiated embryonic tissue that develops into a penis in males and a clitoris in females.

**Geography of fear:** the assessments of vulnerability and fear in certain spaces that women are forced to make as a result of the threat of violence, assault, or harassment.

**Ghettoization:** when women's jobs are separated from men's jobs within an occupation through informal gender typing and the women are then paid less.

**Give 'em Hell:** the idea that real men should exude an aura of manly daring and suggestion, encouraging men to "go for it" and take risks; one of the rules of manhood.

**Glass ceiling:** the fact that despite the progress women have made into many managerial positions in the business world, they are still far less likely than men to have jobs that involve exercising authority over people and resources.

**Glass escalator:** the invisible pressure that men in some occupations face to move upward in their professions.

**Going steady:** a courtship practice in which the ideal was for a boy and girl to pair up and date each other exclusively for a long period of time.

**Good provider role:** the idea that a man's primary obligation to his family is to work to meet his family's material needs.

**Harried leisure:** leisure taken in short segments as opposed to the more relaxed and

comfortable extended block of leisure time.

**Head and master laws:** laws that gave husbands the final say regarding all household decisions and joint property in a marriage, meaning that a husband could make decisions about these matters without his wife's knowledge or consent.

**Hegemonic curriculum:** educational institutions that legitimize the dominant culture and marginalize or reject other cultures and forms of knowledge.

**Hegemonic definition of manhood:** what it means to be masculine, or a man in power, a man with power, and a man of power.

**Hegemonic masculinity:** how the dominant ideas about what it means to be a man influence the behaviors of actual men in any given society.

**Heteronormativity:** the way in which heterosexuality is viewed as the normal, natural way of being.

**Hetero-privilege:** the set of unearned rights given to heterosexuals in many societies.

**Hetero-romantic norms:** specific behavioral norms for men and women that are important to proving their masculinity or femininity.

**Hijab:** the belief in certain cultures that women should demonstrate modesty in their dress; comes from the word for *veil* and can take the form of a full-body covering or a headscarf.

**Homophobia:** fear of homosexuality.

**Homosexual identity:** considering being lesbian or gay to be a part of one's individual self-concept.

**Homosociality:** the continuum of cooperative relations between people of the same gender.

**Hookups:** sexual encounters, usually lasting only one night, between two people who were strangers or brief acquaintances.

**Household division of labor:** the way in which the tasks necessary to the care and running of a household are distributed.

**Human capital:** the skills workers may acquire through education, job training, and job tenure that affect their ability to be productive in their jobs.

**Human capital theory:** an explanation for sex segregation that argues that individual occupational choice results from the attempt to maximize the benefits and reduce the costs involved in any particular job.

**Human trafficking:** using coercive force to sell a person for exploitative uses.

**Ideal love:** submission to and adoration of an idealized other whom one would like to be like and from whom one wants confirmation and recognition.

**Ideal worker norm:** the set of expectations attached to employees emerging from the organizational logic of the workplace; generally, these expectations assume a male employee whose life is centered on his job and who has a wife or some other woman to take care of his own needs as well as those of any family he might have.

**Identity-based ideologies:** assume that gender identity, or a person's individual sense of his or her own gender irrespective of biology, is the best basis for determining gender.

**Imperialism:** economic, political, or cultural domination over nations or communities.

**Implicit racial bias:** the unconscious attitudes or stereotypes associated with someone of a different race.

**Individual approach:** a perspective that locates gender inside individuals and assumes that gender works from the inside out.

**Individualistic:** societies in which collective needs are generally perceived as less important than the needs of the individual.

**Informal labor:** labor in a setting where there is no legal contract for the work, there is not necessarily a set hourly wage or salary, and none of the income is reported to the government by the employer or the employee.

**Inspiration porn:** *porn* refers to the depiction of disabled people (often doing ordinary things) being used to produce positive effects, such as inspiration or motivation, in non-disabled people.

**Institutional approaches:** gender theories that draw attention to the way in which large-scale organizations and institutions in society help to create and reinforce gender.

**Institutionalized power:** power that derives from the strength of an institution.

**Instrumental:** goal and task oriented.

**Intensive mothering:** a modern ideal held up for women in which being a "good mother" becomes an all-consuming project, demanding that mothers manage their children's development in 'partnership' with medical and scientific experts.

**Interactionist approaches:** gender theories that posit that gender is created in and through social interactions.

**Interaction routines:** patterns or norms of speech or action that are followed with regularity to accomplish some task in an interaction.

**Internal labor markets:** the ways in which larger firms frequently provide structured opportunities for advancement to those currently employed within the firm.

**Interpretive reproduction:** refers to the ways in which children are inventive and resourceful social participants in the reproduction, interpretation, and formation of their social world.

**Intersectionality:** an approach to the study of gender that draws our attention to variations and contradictions in the way people in different social categories experience gender.

**Intersex:** individuals who, based on a variety of biological conditions, do not fit into the contemporary Anglo-European biological sex categories of male and female.

**Job evaluation:** determining how pay is assigned to jobs and evaluating those pay rates as fair or unfair.

**Job-level sex segregation:** sex segregation in the specific positions that workers hold within a specific establishment.

**Kin:** people with whom you're related either by actual blood or through symbolic ties.

**Leisure:** the opposite of paid work, or what we do with our time when we're not working jobs in the formal economy.

**Life-course perspective:** looking at how key experiences and social roles influence individuals' lives through biographies that transform through exposure to new social settings, unfolding in an interactive trajectory.

**Love marriage:** a type of marriage that evolved in Anglo-European societies in the last 150 years and emphasizes the importance of romantic attraction.

**Maquiladoras:** assembly plants largely owned by American and other foreign companies that are located along the Mexico–U.S. border to take advantage of the supply of cheap labor, reduced taxes, and more relaxed regulation across the border.

**Marginalized masculinity:** the relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups.

**Marital rape:** nonconsensual sex occurring within a marriage.

**Market segmentation:** a sales approach in which corporations divide a large and diverse market for a product into smaller segments based on characteristics like gender, social class, and race.

**Marriage gradient:** demographic pattern in which women tend to marry up in social status (i.e., to marry men with a higher social status than themselves), while men marry down in social status.

**Marriage squeeze:** a shortage of one sex or the other in the age group in which marriage generally occurs.

**Matrix of domination:** in intersectional theory, the way in which the social structures of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation work with and through each other so that any individual experiences each of these categories differently depending on his or her unique social location.

**Media power theory:** a perspective that perceives the culture industry as a well-oiled machine producing entertainment products to make a profit and that places most of the power over content in the hands of the producers.

**Meta-narrative:** a story that attempts a comprehensive and universal explanation of some phenomenon.

**Midriff:** in popular media, a young woman who intentionally uses her sexuality as a means of empowerment.

**Mind–body dualism:** in Anglo-European society, the split between the physical body and the nonmaterial entity we call mind, where the mind is

perceived as superior in many ways to the inferior body.

**Modernization theory:** the belief that in the postcolonial world, the global South would become like the countries of the developed world if it followed their lead economically, politically, and socially.

**Modern marriage:** an institution freely chosen based on love and compatibility and composed of a sole male breadwinner plus an economically dependent wife and children.

**Moral panic:** an overheated, short-lived period of intense social concern over an issue.

**Multiple consciousness:** the way of thinking that develops from a person's position at the center of an intersecting and mutually reliant system of oppression.

**Nationalism:** a genre of claims, understandings, and grounds for recognizing, promoting, and legitimizing peoplehood, identity, and sovereignty.

**Neurodiversity:** term used to describe the ways in which some people have brains that operate in ways divergent from what is seen as "typical."

**Nongovernmental organizations:** organizations that work on various problems that might be considered the role of government to solve—social, political, economic, or environmental problems—but have no government affiliation and are privately funded entities.

**No Sissy Stuff:** the idea that real men don't do anything that carries with it the least suggestion of femininity; one of the rules of manhood.

**Nuclear family:** a family grouping that consists of a mother, a father, and their children.

**Occupational sex segregation:** the concentration of women and men in different occupations.

**Organizational logic:** the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that underlie an organization and that often have gendered implications.

**Othermothers:** women who may or may not be biologically related to children but play a crucial role in assisting bloodmothers with the task of caring for and raising children.

**Overspill of meanings:** in a cultural product, when the viewers create their own meaning that goes beyond the preferred meaning.

**Patriarchal dividend:** the advantage to men as a group for maintaining the unequal gender order.

**Political efficacy:** the sense that what a person does really matters in terms of making change.

**Political elite:** the small group of people who hold high-level positions of power and responsibility in a government.

**Political socialization:** the process by which people learn what is expected of them in their particular political system.

**Postfeminism:** a historical trend in feminism, originating in the third wave, best illustrated by examples of typically heterosexual, white, middle-class female achievement in male-dominated workplaces, women's ability to treat men as sexual objects, and the seemingly unfettered freedoms women enjoy in respect to career choice, parenting, and domesticity.

**Postmodern family:** the changing, unsettled recombination of family into different forms that some argue have taken the place of traditional family structures.

**Power:** the ability of some actors to influence the behavior of others, whether through the use of persuasion, authority, or coercion.

**Preferred meaning:** in a cultural product, the meaning intended by the producers of that cultural product.

**Primary groups:** the intimate, enduring, unspecialized relationships among small groups who generally spend a great deal of time together.

**Primary socialization:** the initial process of learning the ways of a society or groups that occurs in infancy and childhood and is transmitted through the primary groups to which we belong.

**Private sphere:** anything that's not public, primarily the home and family life defined as the place where women belong with the separation of spheres.

**Private troubles:** those problems we face that have to do with ourselves and our immediate surroundings.

**Privilege:** a set of mostly unearned rewards and benefits that come with a given status in society.

**Protective labor legislation:** laws that prohibit certain kinds of persons—usually women and children—from working in certain types of jobs or in certain kinds of situations based on the belief that these jobs or situations would be dangerous or harmful.

**Psychoanalytic identification:** the way in which a child modifies her own sense of self in order to incorporate some ability, attribute, or power she sees in others around her.

**Psychoanalytic theory:** a theory of gender socialization drawing on Freud and feminism that emphasizes the ways in which gender becomes deeply embedded in the psychic structure of our personalities.

**Public issues:** issues beyond the individual that are located within the larger structures of our societies.

**Public sphere:** the world of market relations and productive behavior, a world labeled as distinctly masculine with the separation of spheres.

**Pure leisure:** leisure that involves no nonleisure activities.

**Rating-dating-mating complex:** a courtship practice in which girls and boys dated many people at the same time.

**Relaxation:** one explanation for boys' attraction to video games that perceives them as an escape from the weight of adult demands and of the rules of social decorum.

**Remittances:** the money and income immigrants send back to their families in their countries of origin.

**Resegregation:** when an entire occupation transitions from one gender to another, usually from a predominantly male to a predominantly female occupation.

**Residential segregation:** separation in terms of where people live.

**Restoration:** one explanation for boys' attraction to video games that perceives part of the appeal as being the sense of control they give their players that is not available in the real world.

**Revenge:** one explanation for boys' attraction to video games that perceives them as a way to get revenge against those who have usurped what they thought was theirs.

**Reverse discrimination:** the perception that affirmative action policies result in discrimination against dominant groups such as whites and men.

**Romantic love:** a couple coming together, sharing the excitement of an erotic relationship, and feeling united with each other in such a way that the object of their love is unique and irreplaceable.

**Romantic love:** an intense attraction in which the love object is idealized.

**Schema:** a cognitive structure and network of associations that helps to organize an individual's perception of the world.

**Secondary groups:** generally larger, more temporary, more impersonal, and more specialized groups that also engage in socialization.

**Secondary socialization:** the learning process that takes place each time we join one of these new secondary groups.

**Second shift:** the extra burden of childcare and housework added on for women who also do paid work outside the home.

**Sex:** any act identified as sexual.

**Sex categorization:** the way we use cues of culturally presumed appearance and behavior to represent physical sex differences that we generally cannot see.

**Sex difference research:** a body of research that identifies whether a wide range of traits, dispositions, and behaviors differ significantly between men and women.

**Sex hormones:** types of hormones that are thought of as being involved in sex characteristics and sexuality, e.g., estrogen and progesterone.

**Sexology:** the scientific study of sex.

**Sex ratio:** the ratio of males to females in a given society.

**Sex role:** the set of expectations attached to one's particular sex category.

**Sex segregation:** the concentration of women and men into

different jobs, occupations, and firms.

**Sex-typed behaviors:** behaviors that are more expected and therefore perceived as appropriate when performed by one sex but less expected and therefore perceived as inappropriate when performed by the other sex.

**Sexual attraction:** a combination of objective physical responses and subjective psychological or emotional responses to some internal or external stimulus.

**Sexual convergence:** the trend for the norms and ideals of women's sexuality to become increasingly similar to the norms and ideals of men's sexuality.

**Sexual cultures:** a particular way of life characterized by a group of people who share a sexual identity.

**Sexual desire:** a combination of objective physical responses and subjective psychological or emotional responses to some internal or external stimulus.

**Sexual dimorphism:** the belief that there are two discrete, biological, and objectively real categories called male and female.

**Sexual identity:** the particular category into which people place themselves based on the current, Anglo-European division of the world into heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual.

**Sexual object:** the passive recipient of sexual behavior and sexual desire, or the one who is sexually acted on and sexually desired rather than the one doing the sexual acting and sexual desiring.

**Sexual scripts:** the learned guidelines for sexual expression that provide individuals with a sense of appropriate sexual behaviors and sexual desires for their particular culture.

**Sexual subjects:** people who have a sense of power and agency in their own body that allows them to *act in* their bodies rather than being *acted on*.

**Shipping:** having a general affinity for some fictional couple.

**Side-by-side:** in sex difference research, a way of describing men's friendships as characterized by someone with whom they can share activities and interests.

**Size:** in social network theory, the number of others to whom someone is linked in a network.

**Slash:** a genre of fan fiction that sexualizes or romanticizes usually same-sex media relationships.

**Sociability:** mode of social interaction characterized by being social purely for the sake of enjoyment, with no ulterior motive or specific content prescribed.

**Social aggregates:** building blocks of society that are composed of individuals but become more than the sum of the individuals within them.

**Social institutions:** groups, organizations, behaviors, or patterns that serve a specific function in society.

**Socialization:** the ways in which we learn to become a member of a group.

**Socialization theory:** an explanation for sex segregation that argues that our experiences with gender socialization lead men and women to prefer different types of jobs.

**Social learning theory:** a theory of gender socialization based in behaviorism that posits that we learn norms through the rewarding or withholding of rewards for certain behaviors.

**Social role:** a set of expectations attached to a particular status or position in society.

**Social segregation:** the separation of some realm of social life into different groups based on some category.

**Sociological imagination:** the ability to see the connection between one's own life and larger social structures.

**State feminism:** all the activities of governments that are officially charged with furthering women's status and rights.

**Strong social constructionist approach:** an approach to the relationship between gender and sex category that views both as socially constructed.

**Studying up:** the need to study those at the top of any particular power structure or hierarchy.

**Subordinated masculinity:** men who are at the bottom of the hierarchy of masculinities created by hegemonic masculinity.

**Substantive representation:** the representation of group

interests, or the extent to which the members of the particular group represent the interest of that group when they are elected.

**Target of socialization:** the person being socialized.

**The double jeopardy hypothesis:** the assumption that Black women should face compounding discrimination because they belong to multiple marginalized groups—women and Black people.

**The medical stare:** the uniquely forceful and pathologizing medical gaze upon disabled bodies.

**The normalcy project:** a concept that originates from the intersection of feminism and disability to describe a regime of beliefs and practices, emanating from science and medicine, that are preoccupied with eradicating disability and which prize a typical body.

**The super crip:** where disabled people are either attributed with superhuman abilities or praised excessively for relatively ordinary achievements.

**Thomas principle:** the principle that what people believe to be real is real in its consequences.

**Transgender:** umbrella term for individuals whose biological gender or sex category does not match with some other aspect of their gender expression.

**Transmisgynoir:** the ways in which sexism, cissexism, and racism all intersect in the oppression of black trans women and trans women of color more generally.

**Transnational marriages:** marriages that cross national borders.

**Transnational motherhood:** relationship between mother and children that crosses national borders.

**Two-gender model:** women and men are believed to be two completely different types of people, and sex categories are viewed as discrete (you're either male or female, and there's nothing in between).

**Two-sex model:** a model of sex categories in which women and men are believed to be two completely different types of people and sex is viewed as a bounded category.

**Two-spirit:** blanket term for the wide variety of third-gender roles in Native American cultures; places emphasis on the cultural aspect of these positions.

**Vulnerable employment:** the informal jobs that are lower paid overall relative to jobs in the formal economy.

**White, working-class male buffoon:** a gender, racial, and social class stereotype shown on television as dumb, immature, irresponsible, and lacking in common sense.

**Women in development:** a perspective that emphasizes women's roles in development and the potentially adverse effects of development on women.

**Young male syndrome:** the perceived, expected, and often necessary pressure to perform a tough, violent, and deviant manhood in order to receive and maintain respect.

**Youth control complex:** an all-encompassing system of criminalization molded by the synchronized, systematic punishment meted out by socializing and social control institutions.

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## CHAPTER 9

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# INDEX


ability, women's, 255, 325, 362, 422
abortion, 23, 420–22, 424
accountability, 31–34, 45
accountable performance of gender, 124, 242, 280
ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), 230
adolescent boys, 135, 137
Adorno, 354–56, 365, 381
adult women, 50, 169, 418
advice, 68–69, 200, 211, 221, 245
African Americans, 37–38, 58, 67, 113, 155, 228–29, 232, 269–71, 359–60, 366–67, 369
age groups, 100, 168, 229, 257, 380
agents of gender socialization, 103, 110
agents of socialization, 86–87, 89, 103, 110, 118, 378
ages, 8, 88–89, 107–10, 112–14, 117, 129–30, 137–38, 171–72, 188, 193–94, 196–97, 199, 205–6, 216–19, 227–29, 254–59, 261–62, 286–87, 333–34, 366–67
AIS (androgen insensitivity syndrome), 9, 81
American Eugenics Society, 239
American girls, 136–37
American parents, 137
American Society, 27, 37, 154
American Society of Plastic Surgeons, 212
amount of free time, 375
amount of power, 203, 242, 284, 385
amount of work, 295
anatomy, women's, 233
Anglo culture, 235
Anglo-European world, 6, 20, 22, 102, 104, 129, 179, 214, 365, 413
approach
  doing-gender, 176, 242
  historical, 5
  institutional-level, 328, 335
Arab cultures, 154–55, 366
Arab women, 365–66
Arab world, 365–66
Armstrong, 188, 395–98, 427–28
asexuality, 148–49, 158–59
Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), 148
Asian American, 6, 50, 170, 212–14, 216–17, 297, 306, 332
attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 230
audience, 32, 55, 167, 355–57, 360, 363–64, 371
audience power, 356, 377–78
audience power theory, 341, 356–57, 360, 362, 364, 381
authority, 302, 304, 322, 329–30, 333, 336, 384, 404, 408, 423, 426, 428
AVEN (Asexuality Visibility and Education Network), 148

backlash, 23, 45, 55–56, 154, 207, 254–55
Bailey, 183–86, 201
balance of power, 383
Bans on transgender youth participation in sports, 406
beauty, 127, 179, 203, 205–10, 212–16, 245, 361, 371
beauty ideals, 203, 206–7
beauty myth, 206–8, 210–11, 215, 219, 241, 244–45
behaviorism, 86–87
behaviors
  grinding, 138–39
  same-gender, 128
benefits, hooking up and friends with, 190–91, 198
biological differences, 6–7, 11
biological reality, 5–6, 8, 10–11, 124, 237
biological sex, 26, 80, 83–84, 104–5
birth control, 23, 136, 237, 239, 245
bisexual, 121–22, 133, 142, 144, 146–50, 158, 180, 189, 196–97, 200, 327
bisexuality, 147–48
Black, 18, 37–38, 58–59, 195, 197, 228–29, 291, 304–5, 307–8, 312–13, 332, 359–60, 366–68
Black male nurses, 305
Black women, 21, 37, 40, 155, 171–72, 291, 307–8, 312, 347, 415–16
Black women and white women, 171
bodies, 7, 9, 11–12, 69–70, 80–81, 103, 105, 134, 136, 138–39, 181, 203–45, 352, 361–62, 401–3
  biological, 8–9, 11
  hard, 351–52
  physical, 8, 11–12, 85, 136, 204, 219
  trans, 224
  typical, 273
bodies intersect, 203, 205
body dualism, 204–6, 217, 219, 231, 242–44

body image, 205, 217, 219, 241–45, 351
boyfriends, 31, 103, 135–37, 146, 188, 209, 364, 395
boys, 7–8, 41–42, 49–50, 77–79, 84–85, 87–89, 93–94, 96–97, 99–100, 106–9, 123–24, 134–36, 164–65, 168–69, 185–87, 189, 222–23, 353, 363–64, 369–71
  little, 77, 84, 87, 89, 306
  older, 130, 165, 386–87
  teen, 353
boys and girls, 52, 93, 96, 100, 106, 108, 135, 152, 169, 186, 222
brains, 8–9, 48, 53, 107, 162–63, 165–66, 178–79, 198, 200, 204, 216
business world, 304

CAH (congenital adrenal hyperplasia), 9, 81
care, gender-affirming, 223–24, 243, 405
careers, 51, 255, 257, 300, 302–4, 318, 324–25, 331, 336–37, 347, 349
caregivers, 114, 278, 285
caregiving, 114–15, 272
care of bodies, 231
categories, 3–5, 7, 9–12, 24, 38–43, 54–55, 59–62, 83, 90–91, 123–24, 127–28, 149, 154–56, 195–96, 229–30, 242–43, 310–11, 363–64
  occupational, 312, 314
categories of gender and sexuality, 60, 363
categories of sex and gender, 60, 91, 122
categories of sexuality, 60, 122, 129, 141
category of heterosexual, 59–60
census, 60, 285–86, 306, 311–12
characters, 7, 127, 145, 148, 354, 356, 358–60, 363, 370, 372, 375
  female, 346, 354, 363–64, 370–72, 380
  male, 128, 363, 372
child, 29, 77–79, 84–85, 93, 102, 109, 111, 114, 116, 128, 130, 179–80, 261–62, 274, 281
childbirth, 225, 232–33, 270
child care, 278, 377
childcare, 97, 262, 266, 271, 277–78, 280, 282–84, 290, 298, 325–26, 376
childcare and housework, 277, 280, 298
child-rearing, 268, 270, 290
children, 27–29, 87–94, 96–97, 99–107, 113, 115, 117–18, 174–75, 178–80, 236–38, 261–62, 264–68, 270–75, 277–87, 298, 325–26, 369–70, 375–76, 399–401, 417–19
  gender-neutral, 29
  young, 90, 97, 106, 113, 278, 376, 380
choice, 162–63, 167, 180–81, 221, 225, 253, 285–87, 290, 292, 355, 360, 401
  individual, 156, 192–93, 263, 328
chromosomes, 9–11, 30, 80–82, 123, 408–9
Cinderella, 100, 369–71, 378
cisgender, 6, 17, 19, 55–56, 123, 196, 304
cis women, 195, 211, 216, 262–64, 273
cis women in relationships, 262–63
civil rights movement, 21, 55, 411
class
  lower, 67, 184, 237–38
  math, 49, 53
  upper, 184–85
clitoris, 79–80, 84, 214, 233–34
coercive power, 383–84, 389, 393–94, 398, 401–2, 404, 426, 428
cognitive-development theory, 87–91, 95, 101, 112, 118
college campuses, 138, 151, 183, 187–89, 191, 372, 394–95
college women, 188, 428
colonialism, 19, 62, 66, 72, 154, 416
color, 17, 38, 45–46, 56, 128, 143, 282, 304, 306–8, 318–19, 321, 334, 344–45, 351, 372–74, 386
color and women dominate, 308
committed relationship, 188–89, 197, 253
comothers, 281, 283
companies, 53, 145, 163, 209, 311–12, 319, 327, 334, 353, 376, 404
compulsive heterosexuality, 124–26, 159
concentration of women, 306, 311
conceptualization, 50–51, 64
congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), 9, 81
Congress, 55, 254, 401, 411, 419, 421, 424
constraints, structural, 170
construction worker, 294–96, 332
content, gendered, 91, 343
cosmetic surgery, 211–15, 217
countries, 5, 63–64, 96–99, 110, 191, 239–40, 258, 290–91, 295, 298, 366, 375, 404–5, 411–12, 417–18
  new, 110–12
Country/Historical Time, 131–32
couples, 29, 79, 192–93, 220–21, 253, 258, 260, 277, 280, 282–83, 287, 289–90, 362–63
  cisgender, 263
  married, 131, 197, 253, 265, 286
courtship, 174, 183, 185–87, 189–92, 198–99, 201
cross-cultural evidence, 10
cultural construction of gender and sexuality, 160

culture industry, 354–57, 360, 381
cultures, 4–5, 62–63, 91–92, 96–97, 110–11, 113, 115–17, 121–23, 129–32, 143, 153–54, 160–62, 178–79, 191–92, 197–98, 206–7, 214–16, 354, 402–4, 422
  ballroom, 360
cultures and historical time periods, 131, 207

date, 152, 161, 181, 183, 185–88, 195–97, 199, 204, 236, 359, 392
  good, 186
dating, 161, 163, 178, 181, 183–91, 195–96, 199, 201, 204
dating sites, 195, 197, 199
daughters, 87, 94, 96, 107, 136–37, 139, 154, 184, 213, 251–52, 266, 272, 317
daytime, 348–49
defining friendship, 163
degendered parenting, 283, 291
democracy, 20–21, 57, 63–64, 256, 416–18, 429
depiction of transgender people, 224, 360
depictions, 127–28, 351, 357–60
depictions of women, 166, 365–66
depression, 206, 230, 235–36, 300, 374
development, 8, 21, 41, 48, 64–68, 72–73, 85, 89, 93–95, 103, 119
development project, 63–65, 72
differences, 6–8, 27–28, 39–40, 48–54, 56–58, 61, 109–10, 121, 160–62, 168, 171–73, 214–16, 218, 228–30, 241, 293, 320, 375–76, 415–16, 423–26
  average, 8, 49, 51, 220
differences in homosociality, 61
disabilities, 5, 43, 209, 273–74, 289, 297, 301–2, 360–62, 365
disabled girls and women, 361–62
discrimination, 148, 223, 228, 270, 272, 327–28, 330, 332, 334, 336–37, 373–74, 394, 404
discussion of sex difference research, 53, 167–68
diseases, 55, 57, 65, 81, 114, 225, 229–31, 234, 313, 366
Disney, 127, 348, 369–70, 382
disproportionate numbers of women, 233, 316
division of household labor, 16, 33, 263–64, 269, 275, 277, 279, 281, 289, 292
doctors, 7, 9, 79–80, 82–84, 102–4, 117, 175, 212–14, 230–34, 236, 300, 302, 308, 322, 324
  male, 231–33
doctrine of separate spheres, 184, 264, 266–71, 273, 275–77, 285, 291, 294, 300, 413, 418–19
doing-gender perspective, 29–33, 37, 105, 124, 220, 280–81
Dutch culture, 137

ecofeminism, 47, 66–67, 71, 73
egalitarian gender ideologies, 113
Egyptian women, 366
electability, 413, 415–16
elementary school teacher, male, 303, 321
employers, 272, 296, 306, 314–17, 324, 328, 331, 390, 400, 410
empowerment, 54, 211, 215–17, 226, 361, 428
empowerment of women, 428
environment, 8, 48, 50, 57, 66–68, 71, 88–89, 95–96, 397, 417
ethnocentrism, 132, 159, 214, 402–3, 425
eugenics, 237–40, 244
experience of gender socialization, 96, 102, 104, 116
experiences of transgender, 43, 330, 360, 410

factories, 184, 228, 264, 266, 269, 312–13, 315, 317, 322, 339
families, 96–97, 109–12, 114–15, 158–59, 161–62, 178–81, 192–94, 249–50, 259–62, 264–75, 277–92, 294, 297–98, 322, 325–26, 329, 331–32, 351, 387, 399
  biological, 180, 285–86
  middle-class, 266, 271, 367
  modern, 286–87
  noble, 252
  transnational, 272–73, 286
  wife's, 193, 252
  woman's, 193–94
  working-class, 184, 269, 299
families of choice, 180–81, 200, 285–86, 292, 360
fan fiction world, 362
fear, 135–36, 188, 231–32, 241, 299–300, 367, 371, 386–87, 390–93, 397, 427–29
federal contractors, 334
female occupations, 95, 302–5, 314–16, 321, 326
feminine behavior, 31, 78, 89, 91
feminine gender identity, 94, 103
feminine personalities, 67, 94
feminine sexuality, 136, 140–41, 156–57
feminism, 15, 17, 19–24, 44–46, 54, 56, 59, 153–54, 245, 355, 362, 403–4
  radical, 26, 65
feminist movement, 20–23, 45, 47, 56, 59, 207, 254, 257, 319, 333, 389
feminists, 17, 19–21, 23–25, 28, 44–45, 59, 67–68, 153, 205–7, 239, 254, 262, 264, 387–88, 390
Filipina woman, 111
Filipina women, 111–12
Filipino culture, 111–12

films, 127–28, 158, 195, 300, 344–49, 360, 363, 366–68, 370–71, 377, 379–81
five processes of gendered organizations, 35–36
formal organizations, 342–43, 378, 381
Frankfurt School, 354–56, 365
free time, 294, 375, 385
friends, 44–45, 87–88, 158–80, 182, 189–91, 198, 200–201, 285–86, 297, 300, 303, 372, 378
  best, 30, 162, 164–65
  close, 162, 165, 177
  female, 139, 166, 176
  fewer, 175
  first, 161
  general, 165
  sober, 397
friendship relationships, 164, 173
friendships, 69, 121, 161–81, 190, 194, 198–201, 300, 342
  cross-racial, 171–72
friendship styles, 167–68

gay, 17–18, 41–42, 54–61, 108, 133, 141–44, 147, 149–54, 158, 160, 169, 180–81, 196–97, 200–201, 279–83, 285–88, 291–92, 303–5, 327, 386
gay and lesbian, 12, 59, 61, 125, 129, 158
gay and lesbian couples, 151, 279–80, 286–87
gay and lesbian families, 279
gay and lesbian rights movement, 54–56, 58–59, 153
gay cultures, 143, 282
gays and lesbians, 55–56, 58, 61, 125, 141–42, 148, 154, 160, 280
gender, 3–429
  redo, 34
  undo, 34
Gender & Society, 46, 119–20, 201, 246, 292, 338–40, 381, 428–29
gender and bodies, 7, 181, 204, 215, 223, 240
gender and development, 65
gender and friendship, 165, 167, 173, 199
gender and inequality, 26–27
gender and power, 384–85, 387, 411, 425
gender and race, 19, 416
gender and sexuality, 60, 121–22, 128, 134, 139, 151, 158, 160, 351, 362, 364–65, 409
gender and socialization, 77, 104
gender and work, 295, 302, 305, 320, 335, 375
gender assignment, 7, 13, 30, 223
gender attribution, 3, 7, 13, 28, 101, 211, 241, 409
gender beliefs, 198
gender biases, 51, 295, 332
gender categories, 3–4, 44, 71, 91, 101–2, 116, 156, 383, 404, 409–10
gender classes, 6, 187
gender composition, 316, 333–34, 349
gender congruency, 89, 118
gender constancy, 88–89, 118
gender content, 348–49, 379
gender development, 91, 94
gender differences, 34, 167, 169, 172, 174–76, 221, 274, 276, 279, 288–89, 339–40, 426–27, 429
  important, 375–76
gender differences in friendship, 167, 169, 172
gender differences in friendships, 169, 174, 176
gendered behaviors, 37, 117
gendered division of labor, 249, 261–62, 283, 291
gendered household division of labor, 280
gendered implications, 157, 240, 290, 328–30, 378, 395
gendered interactions, 34, 37
gendered messages, 343–44
gendered organizations, 15, 34–37, 42, 46, 152, 328, 330, 332–33, 338
Gendered organizations theory, 328, 338
gendered person, 78, 115, 223
gendered phenomena, 17, 36
gender equality, 22–23, 97, 101, 215, 255, 257, 403, 411, 418, 424, 427–28
gender expectations, 71, 137, 280, 304
Gender Gap, 377
Gender Gap Score, 98–99
gender identity, 5, 10, 30–31, 78–79, 88–89, 93–94, 115, 150, 152, 169–70, 182–83, 195, 223–24, 327, 359, 406, 408–9
gender ideologies, 62, 113, 267, 315, 320, 418
  dominant, 174, 176
gender in Anglo-European society, 47, 92
gender inequality, 26, 28, 33, 53–54, 56, 70–71, 203, 206–7, 288–89, 335, 379, 381, 401, 417, 424–25
  maintaining, 215, 393
  reducing, 26, 29, 44, 71, 335
gendering, 267, 336, 348
gender in sociology, 17, 27
genderless world, 379, 426
gender makeup, 186, 243, 311, 343, 378
gender messages, 243, 369, 377, 379
gender naturalization work, 409, 428
gender-neutral preschools, 97, 100, 118
Gender-neutral preschools in Sweden, 97, 100, 102
gender-neutral terms, 91, 101, 328–29
gender norms, 78–79, 87, 110–12, 118, 206, 211, 221, 249, 259–61, 279–80, 286
  traditional, 259, 354

gender of bodies, 229, 243
gender of sexuality, 121, 242
gender of work, 293, 335–36
gender panics, 408–9, 428
gender polarization, 91–92, 118, 305
gender research, 24, 53
gender roles, 44, 67–69, 131, 149, 267, 323, 329, 357, 382
gender schemas, 90–92, 118
gender schema theory, 90–92, 95, 112, 115, 117–19
gender scholars, 9, 62, 65, 124, 156, 411, 417–18, 423–24
gender socialization, 77–78, 83–90, 92–97, 100–104, 106–10, 112–13, 115–18, 168–69, 323–24, 330, 332, 378–79, 382
gender socialization stories, 86, 116
gender socialization theory, 92, 332
gender stability, 88–89, 118
gender status quo, 19, 117, 317, 357
gender stereotypes, 34, 100, 166, 263, 344, 378, 410
gender strategies, 263
gender system, 4, 60, 71, 115, 128, 268
  binary, 4, 10
gender system lets, 60–61, 71
gender theories, 21, 26–27, 43–44, 47, 62, 67–71, 101, 279
gender theorists, 38, 335
gender transgression zone, 117–18, 120
gender transition, 327, 331
gender-type, 88
gender variant categories, 4, 13
gender wage gap, 293, 309–10, 317–18, 320–23, 327–29, 332–35, 337–38, 344, 354
gender wage gap and sex segregation, 322, 335
Gender Wage Gap for Selected Occupations, 309–10
gender works, 4, 6, 15, 28, 30, 33, 36, 43, 47, 69, 89
genitalia, 9, 11, 30, 80–81, 84, 102, 122–23, 155, 194, 223–24, 408–9
geography of fear, 390–92, 427–29
girls, 7–9, 49–50, 52–53, 77–79, 82, 87–88, 93–94, 96–97, 99–100, 105–9, 135–38, 141, 168–69, 185–87, 230, 240–41, 361, 364, 369–71, 399–400
  adolescent, 135–37, 141
  disabled, 361–62
  factory, 184
  little, 29, 77, 87, 89, 107, 306, 371
  trans, 79, 224, 405
girls and boys, 49, 99, 106–8, 159, 168, 185–86, 189, 369–70
girls and women, 108–9, 189, 230, 241, 361–62, 364, 417
girls in Martin's study, 135–36
GLAAD, 147, 200, 358, 380
global gender gap scores, 97–98
global perspective, 46, 62, 176, 181, 269
godparents, 178–79
good provider role, 272, 275, 300
governments, 60, 64, 153–54, 238–40, 290, 296–97, 342, 388, 390, 402, 404, 410–11, 424–25
group of friends, 45, 286
group of women, 19, 167, 215, 257, 262, 414, 420
groups
  new, 77, 112, 233
  particular, 50, 59, 223, 258, 341, 365, 369, 373, 375, 412

halls of power, 413, 419–20
hegemonic masculinity, 37, 41–42, 165, 169, 225, 282, 301, 333, 386–87
height, 41, 49–50, 181, 220–22, 332–33
Height of Adult Women, 50
heterosexual, 17, 59–60, 84, 86, 121–23, 125–28, 132–33, 142, 147, 149–50, 157–58, 182, 302–3, 372–73, 385–86
heterosexual couples, 166, 220–21, 279, 281–83, 287, 290
heterosexuality, 61–62, 93, 124–29, 133, 142, 144–45, 147, 151–53, 157–58, 195, 198
heterosexuality and homosexuality, 147, 152
heterosexual marriages, 131, 257
hierarchies, 4, 8, 41, 46, 67, 129, 198, 285, 288, 320, 338
Hispanic, 197, 228, 297, 307–8, 310, 353, 368
historical perspective, 141, 160, 165, 190, 201, 251, 292, 339, 371, 429
history of heterosexuality, 126–27
Hollywood, 344–45, 347, 349, 354, 358–60, 372
home, 28, 175, 183–85, 239, 264–72, 275–78, 280–81, 284–86, 294, 315–16, 348, 374–75, 377, 391, 397, 419
home and watching television, 348
homosexuality, 42, 55, 61–62, 125–29, 133, 141–42, 147–48, 152–55, 157–58, 160, 169
homosexuality and heterosexuality, 62, 133, 153, 158, 198
homosexuals, 56–59, 121–23, 127, 131–33, 138, 142, 147–50, 153–55, 157, 195, 282
hookup culture, 188–89
hookups, 182, 187–89, 191, 200–201

hormone blockers, 224
hormone replacement therapy, 234–36
hormones, 8–9, 11, 30, 85, 123–24, 221, 230, 235–37, 241, 333, 408–9
hours, 27, 99, 114, 134, 216, 277–78, 296, 298, 312–13, 372, 375–77
hours of free time, 375
household, 179, 183, 262, 266, 268–71, 275, 277–79, 281, 284–87, 289, 298, 338, 342
household division of labor, 249, 270, 277–81, 283–84, 288, 292, 306
household labor, 16, 33, 263–64, 269, 275, 277–83, 289, 292, 376
housework, 16, 33, 63, 263, 269, 277–78, 280, 282–84, 291, 298, 376–77
housework and childcare, 33, 278, 282–83, 376
human capital, 324–26, 329–30, 337
human capital theory, 324–26, 332, 336–37
human trafficking, 398–401, 428
husbands, 139–40, 179–80, 191–93, 251, 253–55, 259–62, 264–68, 270, 272, 274–75, 294, 297–300, 389–90, 419, 421

ideal love, 135–36, 159
ideas of gender, 15, 28, 77, 84, 124
identities
  gendered, 37, 115
  individual, 35–36, 350
image of women, 208, 365, 423
images, 20, 34–36, 137, 206, 208, 341, 351–52, 361, 365–66, 391, 395
images and stories, 365
images of beauty, 208–9, 245
income, 175, 284, 287, 296–98, 313, 316, 322, 329
  women's, 322, 329
income on childcare, 298
increasing numbers of women, 212, 418
individual approach to gender, 27, 78
individuals, asexual, 149, 158
institutional approaches, 26, 45–46, 183, 249, 261, 280, 288, 323
institutionalized power, 63, 384–85, 404, 428
institutional power, 384, 404, 423–24
institution of marriage, 151, 249, 253, 280
institutions, 26–27, 55–57, 63–64, 68–69, 86, 109–10, 125–26, 150–51, 158, 177–79, 249–50, 252–56, 264–65, 267, 280, 283–84, 287–88, 290, 341–42, 383–84
  gendered, 280, 298, 328, 342
  societal, 131, 182
intensive mothering, 273–74, 291
interaction routines, 396–97, 427–28
interactions, 26–32, 34–38, 43, 86–87, 99, 104, 106, 109, 145–46, 171, 176, 300, 302
International Workers of the World (IWW), 410
Internet, 170, 243, 342–43, 352, 355, 357, 377, 379
intersectional approach to gender, 333, 369
intersectionality, 5–6, 13, 38, 40, 43, 46, 143, 221, 319, 362, 369
intersex, 9, 11, 60, 78, 81–86, 103–5, 117–19, 141, 143
intersex children, 78, 102–3, 105, 116
intersex girls, 405
intersex individuals, 9, 30, 80, 83–86, 102–6, 115, 117, 130, 203
intersex status, 103–4
intersex variations, 9–10, 81, 83, 104
investigation of gender, 342–43
involved parent, 8, 274
Islamic world, 402–3
issues of gender, 17, 67
IWW (International Workers of the World), 410

job-level sex segregation, 312, 338
jobs, 226–28, 265, 267–68, 270–71, 284, 293, 295, 297–307, 311–18, 320–36, 338, 347, 372–73, 390, 423
  blue-collar, 331
  dangerous, 228, 313
  female, 326
  lower-paying, 322
  sex-integrated, 323–24
  women's, 316, 320
jobs and occupations, 317, 320, 325–26, 329, 335
jobs women, 313, 315, 323
*Journal of Marriage*, 292
*Journal of Sex Research*, 201, 381
justice, 95, 394, 404, 420, 423, 428

Kimmel, 94, 165, 372–73, 375, 386, 388, 429
Kinsey's research, 133

labor, 261–64, 266–70, 277–81, 283–84, 288–89, 291–92, 294–98, 305–6, 313, 316, 335, 374, 399
large numbers of women, 235, 306, 316, 377
Latina women, 271, 307–8
Latino families, 271
LATs (living apart together), 253
leadership, 220, 305, 413–15, 422–23
learning, 3–4, 16–17, 25, 68–69, 95, 97, 107, 110, 130, 371

learning to. *See* gender, 3–4
legislation, 224, 313, 420–22
leisure, 375–77, 379–81
  women's, 376
leisure time, 13, 341, 375–76, 379–80
lesbian couples, 151, 279–83, 286–87, 292
lesbian families, 279, 281–83
lesbian feminists, 56, 147
lesbianism, 154
lesbian rights movement, 54–56, 58–59, 153
lesbians, 55–61, 141–42, 145, 147–48, 150, 153–54, 158, 160, 194, 196–97, 200, 288, 291–92, 305, 327
  butch, 142
lesbian women, 56, 58–59, 92, 115, 148, 158, 180–81, 196, 281–82
lesbian women of color, 282
living apart together (LATs), 253
love, 121–22, 135–38, 140, 161–65, 178–79, 186, 193–94, 198, 201, 251–53, 265, 268–69, 349–50, 361–62, 364
love and intimacy, 182, 197–98, 201
love and marriage, 251
love fan fiction, 364
love marriage, 265, 288, 291
love your body (LYB), 341, 361–62
LYB. *See* love your body

magazines, 158, 182, 184–85, 208, 215, 336, 341, 343–44, 351–52, 357, 379
male bodies, ideal, 222
male friends, 60, 165, 172–74, 180, 198
male occupations, 302, 314, 316, 318, 321, 329, 339
males, 6–7, 10–11, 54, 80–81, 123–24, 149, 177, 203, 257, 303, 417
manhood, 114, 223, 227, 336, 386–88, 428
marginalized groups, 289, 359–60
marriage, 161, 179, 181–82, 186–87, 189–90, 192–94, 197–98, 249–57, 259–61, 265, 280, 283, 285, 287–92, 342, 389–90
marriage and families, 249–50, 261, 287–89
marriage and family, 280, 283, 288
marriage gradient, 252, 257–58, 260–61, 291
marriage squeeze, 257–58, 291
married women, 277, 313, 317, 326, 390
  white, 269–70
marry, 130–31, 154, 179, 182, 186, 192–93, 250–52, 254–55, 257–60, 265, 280, 286–88
marrying, 111, 193, 255, 259–60, 287
marry women, 257, 260
Martin, 91, 105, 107–8, 128, 134–36, 138, 141, 159, 374, 428
masculine gender identity, 89, 94, 223
masculine sexuality, 134–35, 146, 156, 242, 352
masculinity, 41–42, 65–67, 91–92, 94, 109, 114–15, 130–32, 134–35, 143–44, 169, 222–23, 225–27, 229–30, 267–68, 275–76, 299–303, 332–33, 339, 369–71, 385–88
masculinity and power, 383, 385
mathematical abilities, 48–51, 53
MCATs, 300
media, 52, 61, 117, 188, 224, 341–44, 347–48, 350, 352, 354–60, 365–67, 369, 371, 375, 378–82
  social, 22, 211, 318, 342, 352–53, 371
media and popular culture, 224, 341, 360, 379
media content, 343–44, 354, 356–57, 378
media organizations, 342, 344, 348–50, 352, 354–57, 373
media power, 354, 377–79
media power theory, 354, 360, 381
media products, 355–56, 378
medical care, gender-affirming, 5, 405
medicine, 82, 103, 175, 231–34, 273
menopause, 8, 234–36, 243
menstruation, 33, 80, 234–36, 243
MeToo movement, 22, 318
middle class, 86, 175, 184–85, 221, 351, 385–86, 388
midwives, 230, 232–33
mind, 41, 203–6, 217, 219–20, 231–32, 240, 242–44, 252, 254, 258, 265, 268, 273
Miss World, 210
models, one-gender, 10, 129
modern marriage, 250, 265–66, 289–91
motherhood, 17, 272–74, 276
mothers, 90, 92–94, 107, 111, 169, 183–84, 189, 239, 261–62, 268, 270–75, 278–83, 286–87, 298, 313, 316, 325, 376
  biological, 162, 262, 271, 282–83
movements, 21–23, 28–29, 37–38, 40, 54–56, 58, 63, 66–67, 107–8, 208, 374, 388, 410
  eugenics, 237–40
movies, 182–83, 300, 341–43, 345–49, 352, 355, 357, 360, 362, 365, 368, 370, 378–80
murders, 37–38, 195, 224, 227, 251, 347, 371, 389–90
Muslim women, 402

narratives, 62, 231, 263, 359, 363–65
nationalism, 152–54, 159, 366, 382
National Organization for Women, 21, 154, 337
National Partnership for Women and Families, 290, 318
nations, 20, 62, 110, 114, 153–54, 255, 317, 366, 416–18, 424
Native Americans, 4, 130–31, 155, 228, 231, 287, 313
nature, gendered, 34, 204, 206, 242, 254, 328, 342, 378, 391
nature of gender, 115, 165, 357
Navajo women, 235–36
network, women-centered, 271
*New York Times*, 52, 201, 228, 312
norms, cultural, 210–11, 217, 271, 401
number, disproportionate, 233, 316
numerical representation of women, 413, 418

occupational sex segregation, 306, 311–12, 314, 318, 338
occupations, 227–28, 301–7, 309–12, 314–17, 320–21, 323–27, 329–30, 333, 335–36, 338–39, 344, 390, 393
  highest-paying, 307
  lowest-paying, 308
occupations and jobs, 305, 326, 329, 335
one-gender system, 4
Opposite-sex marriage, 281
organizational logic, 35–36, 45
organizations, 21–22, 34–35, 55, 64–66, 103, 106, 117, 290, 328–29, 332–34, 336–38, 342–44, 384, 398, 401
ovaries, 4, 9, 80, 84–85, 102, 236

pansexual, 122, 142–43, 148, 150, 158, 196
parents, 29, 87, 93, 96–97, 102, 105–11, 114–15, 136–37, 152, 183–84, 261–62, 265, 272–76, 281–82, 290–91, 300, 303, 376, 384
particular theory of gender, 16, 44
parties, 79, 126, 138, 189, 283, 395–97
partners, 142–43, 149–50, 174, 178, 180, 186, 194, 197–98, 256–57, 262–64, 278–79, 282, 286
party scene, 395–98, 427
patients, 55, 103, 212, 214, 231–32, 236, 300, 303, 305
peer cultures, 109, 151, 369
penis, 4, 9, 12, 30, 79–80, 83, 91, 132, 135, 141–43, 218, 223, 409
penises, 9, 11, 80, 84, 123, 143, 223, 409
performance of gender, 32, 105, 124, 176, 280–81
Personal Relationships, 164, 192, 201
picture, women's, 345
policies, 52, 117, 244, 284, 290, 327, 333, 406–8, 410, 416, 424
political power, 251, 411, 418–19, 421, 423–24
political socialization, 418, 428
politics, 55, 66, 69, 72, 245, 251, 411, 413–14, 418–19, 424, 429
popular culture, 188, 191, 208–9, 224–25, 341, 350, 356, 360, 363–64, 366, 379, 382
postfeminism, 362, 381
postmodernism/poststructuralism, 54, 57–58
power, 23–24, 40–42, 126, 128–29, 134–35, 139–40, 155–56, 171–72, 220–22, 250–52, 284, 288–89, 322, 354–57, 363–65, 382–90, 402–4, 410–11, 418–22, 424–26
  colonial, 20, 63, 416–17
  distribute, 126, 150, 425
  maintaining, 242
  supervillain-type, 385
power corrupts, absolute, 384
power imbalance, 53, 62, 66, 206
powerlessness, 387–88
power of gender, 260, 279, 389
power of masculinity, 115, 386
practices, gender-neutral, 34, 329
preference for boys, 96
preschools, 41, 97, 99–102, 107
pressure, 35, 42, 135, 265, 271, 273–76, 304–5, 397, 415–16, 420, 426
pressures on women, 275, 426
Preves, 83, 102–5, 119
primary groups, 95–96, 109–10, 118
primary socialization, 95–97, 109, 118
Primetime Emmy, 360
privileges, 6, 18–19, 24, 38, 40, 45, 58, 66, 125–26, 150, 373
problems, woman's, 393, 398
process of gender socialization, 37, 77, 85–88, 92, 97, 110, 115–16
prostitution, 185, 273, 399, 401–2, 426, 429
psychoanalytic theory, 92–96, 118, 168–69, 423
psychology, 48, 72, 86–87, 89–90, 92
purpose of marriage, 249, 261
purposes of gender, 425

queer theorists, 54, 60–61, 105
queer theory, 48, 54, 57–62, 67, 70–72, 105, 129, 156, 363
questionnaire, 125
questions
  first, 23, 25–26, 34, 125, 413
  global, 173–74, 199

race and gender, 122, 229
rating-dating-mating, 186–87, 189, 200
relationships, 8–9, 11, 67, 131–32, 135, 137, 147, 162–64, 166–67, 169–71, 176, 178–82, 188–90, 194, 198–200, 252–53, 262–64, 289–90, 301–2, 361–64
  intimate, 103, 175, 261
  same-gender, 131, 179
  women's, 67, 299
relationship to gender, 167, 344
representation, women's, 345–46, 418
reproduction, 66, 119, 129–30, 153, 237–38, 240, 242, 329, 369
research, 48–51, 53–54, 107–9, 113–15, 163–68, 170–72, 174–76, 195–96, 198–99, 234–35, 237, 281–84, 289–90, 301–2, 304–5, 317–18, 324–26, 373–76, 416, 421–24
  scientific, 51, 53, 133
research on sex differences, 50–51
respondents, 71, 149, 164, 173–74, 176, 187, 190, 330–31, 376, 405, 414–16
  working-class, 175
roles of women, 38, 298
romantic love, 122, 159, 161, 179, 182, 186, 190–94, 198, 200–201, 350
romantic love in cross-cultural perspective, 191–92

same-gender, 127–31, 147, 195
same-sex, 124, 129, 131–33, 141–42, 152, 157, 188
same-sex marriage, 250, 281
  legalization of, 250
Same-Sex Sexual Behavior, 131–32
Schilt, 7, 194–95, 330–33, 408–9
secondary groups, 110, 118, 120
  new, 110, 112
secondary socialization, 109–10, 112, 118
segregation, occupational, 306–8, 338
sense of gender identity, 88, 93–94
separate spheres, 264, 266–71, 273, 275–77, 285, 291, 294, 300, 377, 413, 418–19
sex, 6–11, 26–30, 33–34, 60–61, 82–85, 87–88, 102, 104–5, 121–26, 128–29, 131–32, 134–40, 142–44, 152–55, 159–60, 187–88, 190, 195, 236–37, 400–402
sex categories, 6–12, 27, 30, 32–34, 82–85, 88, 102, 115, 117, 121–24, 128–29, 132, 138–39, 141, 156
sex categories and gender, 124, 132, 141
sex categorization, 28–29, 31, 34, 45, 409
sex category and gender, 30, 54, 106, 148, 155–56, 269
sex difference research, 47–51, 53–54, 72, 167–68
sex differences, 48–54, 71–72, 119, 167, 378
sex hormones, 9, 11, 234, 236–37, 241, 244, 246
Sex Research, 201, 381
sex roles, 15, 27–28, 42, 45, 78, 87, 245
sex segregation, 305–7, 310–12, 314–15, 317, 320, 322–23, 325–30, 333, 335–36, 338–39, 344
sex-typed behaviors, 87, 118
sexual assault, 347, 349, 383, 387, 390, 394–95, 397–98, 422, 425
sexual attraction, 104, 122–23, 142–43, 148–50, 159, 252
sexual behavior, 66, 121, 127–33, 135, 137–38, 141–43, 152, 157, 188, 190
  appropriate, 138, 157
  immoral, 157
sexual behaviors of women, 190
sexual cultures, 142–43, 159
sexual dimorphism, 6–7, 9, 11, 13, 26, 43, 83, 102, 237, 357
sexual division of labor, 289, 305, 335
sexual harassment, 21–22, 317–19, 331, 349, 389–90, 393–94, 420, 422
sexual identity, 114, 121–22, 126, 132–33, 142–43, 146–50, 157–59, 189, 195–96, 279, 282, 289, 327
sexuality, 38–39, 43–44, 59–62, 80–81, 113, 121–39, 141, 143–46, 149–60, 182–83, 190, 198, 204–5, 242, 331, 341, 351, 362–65, 409
  deviant, 127
  human, 133
  women's, 113, 135, 139, 141, 157–58, 190, 351
sexuality and gender, 139, 146, 155, 160
sexual scripts, 121, 138–39, 141–42, 144, 146, 150, 159
sexual subjects, 134–37, 139, 141–42, 145, 157, 159, 352

sex workers, 358, 360, 401, 426
single women, 184, 254–55
  epoch of, 255
social construction of sexuality, 156–57
social institutions, 25, 126, 249–50, 252, 291, 346
socialization, 77, 85–92, 96–97, 102–7, 109–10, 112, 115–16, 118–20, 168–69, 323, 329, 336, 378
socialization theory, 26, 115–16, 323, 338
social learning theory, 86–87, 89–90, 95, 97, 118–19
social structures, 25–26, 34–36, 39–40, 46, 163, 169–70, 172–73, 178, 183, 205, 387–88
social workers, 274, 303, 305, 309, 321, 400
societies and cultures, 162, 371, 379
society
  consumer, 355
  heteronormative, 151–52
Society Works, 247, 250–428
sociological approach to gender, 24, 70
sociological imagination, 24–25, 45
sociological study of gender, 26, 33
sociological theories of gender, 24, 42, 69, 323
sociology, 3, 6, 15–45, 47–48, 54, 57, 69–70, 77, 338–39, 342–43, 354, 356
sociology of gender, 13, 15–45, 119
Sociology Study Gender, 47–73
spaces, public, 175, 391–93, 403, 427
spheres, separation of, 267–71, 275–76, 280, 284–85, 288, 294, 306
sports, 18, 36, 41, 82, 95, 106–9, 174, 222, 226–27, 394, 405–6
status
  outcast, 401–2
  women's, 65, 92, 390, 424
status quo, 29, 53, 100, 355
stereotypes, 171, 175, 193, 213, 216, 332, 361, 365–66, 378, 416
stories, 31–32, 58–59, 103–6, 116–17, 136–37, 191–93, 195, 251–52, 286–87, 299, 359–60, 363–66, 369–70, 420, 427
stories of socialization, 86
story of gender socialization, 85–86
straight female friends, 180–81
strip clubs, women customers in, 145–46
structural constraints on friendship, 170
structure, personality, 93–94
study gender, 3, 12–13, 43, 83
study of gender, 6, 15, 28–29, 38, 41, 47, 62, 70, 241, 343
surgery, 9–10, 81, 83–84, 102–3, 205–6, 212–15, 217, 234, 327, 359
  gender-confirming, 30, 194–95, 264
Sweden, 29, 97–100, 102, 250, 253, 402, 411
symbolic violence, 424–25
symptoms, 65, 229–30, 234–36

tasks, 114–15, 261–62, 266–71, 275–77, 279, 284–85, 289, 294–95, 297–98, 301–2, 306, 336
teaching, 316–17, 325–26, 361
Teen girls, 353
television, 158, 166, 286, 341–49, 352, 355–60, 365, 367, 369–70, 377–79, 387
television networks, 348, 354
testes, 9, 11, 80–81, 85
theoretical perspectives on gender, 68–69
theories, 15–18, 25–29, 34, 38, 40–44, 46–48, 54, 57–59, 61–63, 65–71, 86, 88–90, 94–96, 115–17, 323–24, 332–33, 335–36, 354, 378, 425
  doing-gender, 16, 34, 409
  individual, 16, 26, 323
  individual-level, 323–24
  particular, 69–70, 116
  working, 15, 17
theories of gender socialization, 86, 92–95, 116
theories of sex segregation, 329–30, 338
theories work, 16, 43
theorists, 11, 15, 19, 26, 28–29, 32–33, 40, 48, 57–59, 63–64
  social learning, 87
theory of sexuality, 60–61
third-wave feminism, 21–22, 46, 58–59
Thomas, 331–32, 420–22, 429
Thorne's research, 106
time, spending, 163–64
time and cultures, 30, 385
time diaries, 376, 380
time periods, 44, 50, 132–33, 181, 183–84, 186, 189, 233, 239, 250, 252, 379
  historical, 6, 127, 131, 207
time thinking, 19, 125, 307
Time Use, 377
Trans Characters, 358, 360
transgender activists, 56, 196, 211, 358
transgender characters, 358–59
transgender children, 89, 405, 408
transgender community, 10, 357, 359
transgender dating preferences, 198–99
transgender depictions, 358
transgender families, 262, 264

transgender individuals, 10, 327, 357–59, 365
transgender kids, 223, 243
transgender person, 30, 196
transgender roles, 358–59
transgender status, 330, 405
transgender woman, 30, 358–59, 410
transgender women, 38, 358
transgender youth, 243, 405, 407
  medical care for, 407–8
transgender youth participation, 406
transition, 30, 129, 184–86, 192, 194, 327, 330–33, 339, 347, 417–18, 422
Transnational Marriage, 258, 291
trans woman, 56, 155, 194–96, 199, 224–25, 358, 360
trans women, 45, 123, 143, 194–96, 225, 241, 262, 359, 410
trans women of color, 38, 194
two-spirits, 4, 130–32, 159
typical story of gender socialization, 85–86, 115

understanding gender, 12–13, 16, 32, 43, 302
understanding gender inequality, 156, 242, 335
understanding of gender, 15, 28, 69, 88
United States, 18–23, 110–12, 176–85, 188–91, 205–14, 226–29, 231–34, 237–40, 254–55, 257–60, 264–66, 269–73, 284–88, 306–8, 310–17, 364–67, 386–90, 399–400, 402–4, 421–24
unmarried women, 131, 254–57, 317

violence, 37–38, 194–95, 226–28, 369, 371, 375, 386, 389–91, 393–94, 398, 401, 403, 425, 427–29
  real-life, 372, 375
voices of women, 21, 62, 424

wages, 321–22, 328–29, 333, 338
Walker, 46, 172–76, 201
Western world, 403–4
White, 19–20, 38, 113, 197, 213, 256, 307–8, 312, 367–68, 373–74, 381
white women, 40, 113, 128, 171–72, 213, 307–8, 318–19, 367, 416
  upper-class, 254, 269
WID, 65
Williams, 94–95, 119, 160, 180, 303–4, 340
Williams's research, 304
wives, 140, 162, 174–75, 251, 259–60, 262, 272, 313, 316, 369, 388–90, 418, 421
woman
  bisexual, 147–48
  young, 151–52, 184–86
woman creator, 345
woman marriages, 179–80
women, 16–25, 48–56, 58–67, 134–47, 164–70, 172–76, 181–93, 204–17, 225–37, 239–46, 257–62, 264–78, 280–88, 293–302, 304–41, 343–52, 361–66, 369–83, 385–405, 410–29
  aristocratic, 221
  bisexual, 147–48, 200
  childless, 326
  cisgender, 123, 410
  disabled, 361
  force, 410
  individual, 318, 326
  left, 64–65, 417
  middle-class, 20, 28, 172–73, 317
  older, 113, 262, 323–24, 336, 400
  postmenopausal, 234, 236
  professional, 175
  straight, 142, 180, 196
  upper-class, 18, 184
  working-class, 38, 45, 59, 172, 175–76, 185, 351
women ages, 20, 317
women and children, 266, 387, 399
women and femininity, 204, 216, 266–67
women and girls, 361, 399, 427
Women and Hollywood, 344–45
Women and media, 381–82
women and minorities, 373
women and people of color, 17, 304, 306, 347
women and women of color, 40, 240
women cook, 52
women customers, 145–46
women directors, 344
women healers, 231–32
women in Congress, 424
women in development, 65, 72
women in legislatures globally, 412
women in positions of political power, 411, 421, 423
women in society, 21, 23
women marry, 111, 255, 257
women of color, 45–46, 59, 115, 128, 256, 318, 334, 344–45, 351
women's bodies, 153, 208, 219, 233–34, 240, 244
women's development, 91, 119
women's friendships, 166–68, 171–75
women's health, 234, 313, 421, 424
women's interests, 424

women's issues, 349, 417, 420–21, 426
Women's March, 22, 45
women's movements, 20–21, 23, 46, 48, 257, 314, 337, 387, 389, 394, 424
Women's Policy Research, 320, 337
women's restrooms, 31, 145, 409
women's roles, 64–65, 67, 94, 268, 284, 329, 410, 414, 424, 426
women's roles in development, 65, 67
women's roles in politics, 414, 424
women's work, 269, 303, 316–17, 320, 323, 336, 338
women Walker, 174
women work, 175, 321
work, 16–17, 20–21, 24–26, 32–33, 36–38, 40, 68–69, 89, 91–92, 113, 174–75, 263–67, 269–73, 275, 277–80, 284–86, 293–340, 344, 375–77, 399–401
  administrative, 304
  domestic, 297
  emotion, 263–64
  equal, 320
  privilege, 18, 41
  productive, 269, 294
  sexual orientation, 39–40
  unpaid, 296, 376
work and home, 285, 375
work and masculinity, 301–2
workday, 277, 313
workers, 228, 264, 296–97, 306, 308, 312–17, 319–22, 324–25, 328, 334, 336
  domestic, 271, 297
work experiences, 300, 332–33
workforce, 20, 279, 306, 314, 320–21, 326, 328, 334
Working-class, 367
working-class male buffoon, 367, 369, 381
working parents, 284, 292
work in predominantly female occupations, 321, 326
work life, 172, 318, 390
work organizations, 312, 329
workplace, 33–34, 52–53, 285, 293–94, 301–2, 305–7, 311–12, 315–18, 320, 323, 327–32, 334–36, 338, 390, 408
work women, 296, 299
world
  adult, 372
  developed, 57, 59, 63–64, 176, 204, 225, 317, 350, 399, 401, 404
  developing, 21, 57, 63–64, 67, 260, 297, 335, 404
  gaming, 374
  gendered, 350, 378
  imaginary, 123
  public, 184–85, 267
World Bank, 63–65
world of politics, 413
world of work, 175, 267, 275, 285, 293–94, 299, 320
world's work, 295, 299
World War II, 57, 62–63, 153, 186, 189, 192, 216, 257, 367

younger boys, 130, 386–87
younger women, 255, 323, 335, 400
young women, 37, 110, 135–36, 151, 178, 189, 191, 210, 265, 364

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